Comparing Criminologists’ Views on Crime and Justice Issues With Those of the General Public

Timothy Griffin¹, Amy Pason¹, Filip Wiecko²†, and Brittany Brace³

Abstract
We report the results of a survey of criminology and criminal justice (CCJ) scholars asking their responses to the same questions posed annually to the general public in Gallup public opinion polls. We found CCJ scholars to be more likely to hold more liberal positions on these issues than the general public. The findings indicate a disconnect between popular crime and justice perspectives (and resultant crime policy formation) and the “experts” presumably best trained and informed on how to go about crime policy. We argue for a renewed discussion among CCJ scholars regarding the relevance and role of academic expertise in crime policy formation and offer suggestions for how CCJ scholars might “go public” in influencing policy decisions.

Keywords
crime policy, newsmaking criminology, expertise

Criminologists have noted and lamented the disjunction between criminological expertise and actual crime policy legislation and formation in the United States, in which simplistic and self-defeating mass incarceration practices continue to be promoted

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(Pratt, 2008; Tonry, 2006) and where political candidates maintain overwhelmingly “tough on crime” postures regardless of recommendations from criminologists (Currie, 2007). Moreover, other scholars have identified an influx of “memorial crime control” legislation passed in the wake of particularly horrific crimes, which are usually enacted without rigorous analysis of the their likely benefits and potential drawbacks (Surette, 2011; see also Griffin & Miller, 2008). Despite an extensive body of scholarly literature questioning the efficacy of mass incarceration, the death penalty, harsh juvenile waiver criteria, and other strict policies, public opinion polls routinely show the public to be highly punitive (Paternoster, Brame, & Bacon, 2008; Tonry, 2006; Walker, 2014). As corrective, Barak (1988, 2007) has called for “newsmaking criminology,” whereby criminologists and other crime experts would seek to make their research findings more accessible to the public and press to achieve greater relevance in crime policy discussions. Similarly, Currie (2007) has called for a more “public criminology,” in which (a) academic experts in crime-related fields would actively and publicly critique current practices and promote more progressive crime policies and (b) higher educational institutions and criminology departments would more aggressively reward academics who engage in public discourse and policy formation. However, a first basic step includes an assessment of what criminal justice experts think of current policies. As public opinion polling influences crime legislation, we believe polling criminal justice experts would open possibilities for criminal justice experts to be part of, and influential in, policy decisions.

Experts calling for “newsmaking” or “public” criminology presume a disjunction between expert and popular opinion, but none of these sources specifically reference any quantification of that disjunction (Barak, 2007; Currie, 2007). In fact, there has been almost no effort to quantify how academic “experts” on criminology and criminal justice (CCJ) directly compare with the general public on specific crime and justice issues. There is an extensive array of literature examining the complex relationship between public opinion and crime policy formation, the apparent general consensus of which is that punitive public attitudes result from the highly politicized and mass-mediated nature of how most Americans perceive crime and justice issues (Gest, 2001; Kappeler & Potter, 2005; Surette, 2011). Sensational cases involving iconic innocent victims and particularly heinous criminals, a perception that the system is lenient on hardcore offenders, and popular fears of crime lead most Americans to assume the simplistic posture of voting for elected officials promising to “get tough” on offenders. It should be noted that a number of observers have pointed out complexity and nuance in these popular attitudes: More informative survey instruments allowing respondents more latitude in choosing punishment types can tease out a greater willingness to accept life without parole for certain categories of homicide, community corrections instead of incarceration, investment in rehabilitation, and other more “progressive” approaches toward crime (Cullen, Fisher, & Applegate, 2000). Nonetheless, despite likely complexities in public attitudes, it is largely accepted that the public is, on average, fairly punitive, and we can expect CCJ scholars to be less so. Yet this presumption has never been rigorously verified quantitatively.
The survey research presented here is an attempt to mend this gap in available literature by presenting the results of an online survey in which CCJ scholars from leading institutions were given the opportunity to respond to some of the questions routinely posed to the general public on crime and justice issues in the Gallup Polls.\textsuperscript{1} Our purpose is threefold: (a) for the first time, specifically document and quantify the perceptions of CCJ scholars and how they compare and contrast with the public on a range of commonly used public opinion survey instruments (on issues other than the death penalty); (b) discuss the implications of any observed rifts between academic and public opinion for crime policy formation; and (c) examine the arguments surrounding a possibly renewed dialogue in the field regarding the relationship among criminological expertise, public opinion, and public policy.

Prior Surveys of Criminal Justice/Criminology Scholars

Given the highly public nature of crime and crime policy discussions and the arguable relevance of expert opinion on these matters (Surette, 2011), it is remarkable how rare surveys of criminologists are. We are aware of a few direct surveys of CCJ scholars examining their ideological views and the possibility of a “paradigm shift” in the ideological basis of prevailing criminological theory, and some of this material becomes more relevant in the Policy Implications section below (Cooper, Walsh, & Ellis, 2010). However, we are aware of only two actual surveys of criminologists regarding their views of specific crime and punishment policy issues, and both of those focused exclusively on the death penalty.

First was a survey of 67 past and (at the time) current presidents of the American Society of Criminology (ASC), the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, and the Law and Society Association regarding the death penalty (Radelet & Akers, 1996). In Radelet and Akers’ (1996) survey, a substantial majority of respondents (87.5\%) did not agree the death penalty was an effective method of preventing capital crimes, which was in sharp contrast with the general public, which overwhelmingly supported the death penalty and agreed it deterred murder. However, Radelet and Akers did not ask the expert respondents to report their overall support, or lack thereof, for the death penalty (regardless of their views of its deterrence value). One could plausibly surmise that low levels of agreement with the deterrence hypothesis were associated with low levels of overall support for the death penalty. Importantly, Radelet and Akers argued that a more educated public with a more nuanced understanding of homicide might be both less likely to believe in the deterrent effect of capital punishment and thus less likely to support it.

A second survey conducted by Radelet and Lacock (2008; replicating Radelet & Akers’, 1996, study), found that most responding criminologists—selected based on whether they were ASC Sutherland Award winners, society fellows, or past ASC presidents from 1997 to 2008—did not believe the death penalty was a deterrent. Radelet and Lacock’s study is of particular relevance to our study because the authors posed the same question as worded in the Gallup opinion polls used for surveys of the general public: “Do you feel that the death penalty acts as a deterrent to the commitment
of murder—that it lowers the murder rate, or not?” Radelet and Lacock found just over 83% of responding academic experts did not believe the death penalty deterred. Radelet and Lacock also asked a number of other questions beyond those posed in the Gallup opinion polls, such as whether the respondents agreed that abolishing the death penalty would cause an increase in homicide rates (a majority did not agree), whether they believed politicians used the death penalty debate for political gain (most agreed), and a number of other variations on the question of whether the death penalty reduced homicides (most respondents indicated they did not believe so). Furthermore, when Radelet and Lacock conducted chi-square tests to compare for significant differences between the responses for the 2008 survey and those of the 1996 survey, they found that, although there were some suggestive differences, none were significant. Radelet and Lacock concluded there was widespread and persistent consensus among expert criminologists that the death penalty does not serve to reduce homicide rates.

These surveys of CCJ scholars are limited in scope, but nonetheless provide a useful guide for the survey items and methodology chosen for our study. We contend that surveys of criminologists on crime and justice issues are notably rare, given that such experts presumably specialize on those issues and their opinions would seem relevant in public discourse. However, the limited findings to date nonetheless highlight what most criminologists, if not the general public, would suspect at least regarding the death penalty: CCJ scholars are less likely to support this punitive measure generally and are commensurately more likely to doubt its efficacy and lament its inequity. We thus conclude that the (limited) evidence suggests CCJ expert views align with more liberal crime control views and that experts generally hold more liberal views than the general public.

**Defining “Liberal” Versus “Conservative” Crime Control**

For the purposes of hypotheses formation, we align crime policy opinions with “liberal” and “conservative” political approaches to policy. We hasten to add we are avoiding any value judgment as to whether conservative or liberal perspectives are intellectually or morally superior. Our approach follows what the general public and academic criminology has come to associate with liberal or conservative policy positions. Following Packard’s (1968) model of “crime control” versus “due process,” we define conservative views as favoring suppression of criminal behavior in an efficient and consistent manner. Conservative approaches are often based on presumptions of rational choice, and where “an eye for an eye” punishment is appropriate for offenders who choose to engage in criminal activity. In contrast, liberal or due process approaches focus more on rehabilitation, as crime might be the result of social inequalities and disadvantages. Furthermore, in the liberal perspective, constitutional rights and individual freedom are prioritized over efficient case processing (see also Mallicoat, 2014). Currie (2007) has similarly documented conservative versus liberal approaches to crime policy and notes that most criminal justice experts would align with liberal positions, while also noting that criminology experts holding more conservative views have more voice in the public as these views align neatly with politically popular...
“tough on crime” positions (see also Gross & Simmons, 2014, for review of conception of liberal academics).

We of course acknowledge that the terms liberal and conservative are far more nuanced than a simple comparison suggests. For example, those holding mostly conservative or liberal positions might have “libertarian” leanings on some issues, which allow viewpoints to be more lenient in regard to legalization of certain drugs while endorsing the death penalty for capital crimes (Husak, 2002; Miron, 2004). We are also careful not to simplistically conflate Republican/conservative and Democratic/liberal, although the two major political parties have tended to define themselves and advocate policy aligned with public opinion along these lines. For example, typical “Republican” crime talking points often reference mandatory prison terms for serious offenders and major drug offenders (including the death penalty for drug “kingpins”), “no frills prisons,” or aggressive criminalization of emerging drugs such as “Ecstasy.” Democrats, on the contrary, propose “fighting inequalities” in the death penalty through DNA testing and other post-capital-conviction measures and affirm the value of proactive treatment and social interventions to reduce the causes of crime (see Gest, 2001, for a nuanced view of how political parties negotiate various crime stances). Thus, our association of policy with “conservative” or “liberal” viewpoints is derived both from common use in the criminal justice literature as well as popular usage by the general public and associations with the dominant political parties in the United States.

Hypotheses

Developing specific research hypotheses for comparing expert versus popular views on crime and justice issues is in a sense straightforward but also challenging. Regarding the death penalty specifically, previous literature strongly suggests a consensus among criminologists contrasting sharply with the general public:

**Hypothesis 1:** Professional academic criminologists are significantly less supportive of the death penalty than the general public.

**Hypothesis 2:** Professional academic criminologists are significantly less likely to believe that the death penalty deters murder.

Formulating specific hypotheses regarding other crime and justice issues is more complex, as to date, there have been no formal comparisons of academics and the general public on non-death penalty issues such as the treatment of juveniles accused of violent felonies, racial profiling, gun control policies, and so forth. However, using previous research on criminologists’ perception of the death penalty as a guide, we can make a general hypothesis regarding how criminologists’ answers will compare to that of the general public on these other issues. Specifically, it suggests criminologists are relatively liberal in their crime and justice views.

**Hypothesis 3:** In general, academic criminologists will hold more liberal views than the general public regarding crime and justice issues.
Method

The research provided here is based on a survey project approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Nevada Reno in 2014, contingent on the normal human subjects protocols of strict anonymity for the respondents and deletion of all unique identifiers immediately upon receipt of their responses. In the interest of minimizing the need for extensive material resources for this survey, the first author designed and developed an online survey instrument using Google Forms. The fourth author individually emailed every tenured and tenure-track faculty member at every PhD criminal justice and criminology program in the United States as identified by Kleck and Barnes (2011) in their analysis of the article productivity of tenure-track faculty members in PhD-granting CCJ programs. The initial sampling frame was 585 tenured/track (assistant, associate, and full professors) CCJ faculty. We chose faculty from PhD-granting institutions under the presumption that scholars in such programs are, on average, elite members of their field with the most credible claim to crime policy expertise based on their levels of training and publication potential. This focus on PhD programs also has precedent in prior analyses of relative article productivity of CCJ programs as well as individual faculty members of those programs (Kleck & Barnes, 2011; see also Copes, Khey, & Tewksbury, 2012).

Recipients would receive an email explaining the purpose of the questionnaire with an invitation to visit the Google Forms survey by selecting a link at the bottom of the solicitation email. Two waves were sent out. The first wave was sent from October 26 to November 12, 2014, and garnered 92 usable responses. The second follow-up wave was sent to all non-respondents from the first wave from January 28 to January 31, 2015. This second wave garnered an additional 56 usable responses, yielding an admittedly suboptimal response rate of 27%. Mitigating concerns about the low response rate are that chi-square tests comparing the two waves on every objective question item showed there to be no differences, suggesting the comparability of respondents and non-respondents overall on their views.

Specific questions used in public opinion surveys of the general public regarding crime and justice issues and reported in the Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics (University at Albany, 2015) were adapted to this electronic format. The exact wordings from these public opinion surveys (used in Gallup Polls) were replicated in the electronic survey form. As our aim is to compare the public versus expert opinion in regard to these issues, we deliberately chose to use the survey questions given to the general public, with Gallup being one of the most recognizable polls. In the interest of parsimony and to maximize response rate, we only selected 21 of these items. Our goal was to allow for direct statistical comparisons (using basic chi-square tests for significant differences) of expert and public views on the very same questions used for national opinion polls.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the comparisons of CCJ scholars’ responses to the survey with the most recent available results for the general public as reported in the Sourcebook. Our first goal was to replicate where possible previous surveys of criminologists. Unless
otherwise noted, all of the bivariate differences and omnibus chi-square results discussed are statistically significant.

**The Death Penalty**

**Question 1:** Are you in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder?

**Question 2:** Do you feel the death penalty acts as a deterrent to the commitment of murder, that it lowers the murder rate, or not?

In 2013, 60% of the general public answered this question affirmatively as compared with only 9.4% of the criminologists responding to our survey (*Sourcebook* Table 2.51). Similarly, in 2011, 32% of the general public agreed that the death penalty served as a deterrent to murder, whereas only 2% of the criminologists in the sample agreed (*Sourcebook* Table 2.57). These results are highly consistent with the earlier surveys of academics on these two questions (Radelet & Akers, 1996; Radelet & Lacock, 2008). Thus, Hypotheses 1 and 2 are confirmed; CCJ scholars in this sample were more likely to oppose, and less likely to place faith in the efficacy of, the death penalty.

We now turn to the balance of the survey items included in our survey of academic criminologists. Among these are two additional items regularly asked of the general public regarding the death penalty:

**Question 3:** Generally speaking, do you believe the death penalty is applied fairly or unfairly in this country today?

**Question 4:** If you could choose between the following two approaches, which do you think is the better penalty for murder—the death penalty or life imprisonment, with absolutely no possibility of parole?

In 2013, slightly over half of the general American public (52%) indicated they believe the death penalty is fairly applied (*Sourcebook* Table 2.0005). Again, by contrast, an overwhelming majority of responding criminologists from the survey data (81.5%) indicated the opposite. Furthermore, and similarly, in 2010, while almost half of the American public (49%) preferred the death penalty for murderers, even when life without the possibility of parole was provided as an alternative (*Sourcebook* Table 2.49), only 6.9% of responding criminologists adopted that position. Thus, our “general hypothesis” of greater “liberalism” within the academy on these additional death penalty questions is confirmed.

**Comparing Responses to Remaining Questions About Crime and Societal Response**

The balance of the survey replicated a number of other questions about perceptions of crime and justice issues as reported in the *Sourcebook* (see Table 1). Among those was a question regarding perceptions of crime trends in general (Question 5) and drug crime specifically (Question 6):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “Are you in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder?” (2013)</td>
<td>Yes*** 60%/9.4%</td>
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<td>(617/14)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. “Do you feel that the death penalty acts as a deterrent to the commitment of murder, that it lowers the murder rate, or not?” (2011)</td>
<td>Yes*** 32%/2%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(322/3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. “Generally speaking, do you believe the death penalty is applied fairly or unfairly in this country today?” (2013)</td>
<td>Fairly*** 52%/11%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(535/16)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. “If you could choose between the following two approaches, which do you think is the better penalty for murder—the death penalty or life imprisonment, with absolutely no possibility of parole?” (2013)</td>
<td>Death penalty*** 49%/9.6%</td>
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<td>(502/10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. “Is there more crime in the U.S. than there was a year ago, or less?” (2011)</td>
<td>More*** 68%/6.2%</td>
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<td>(683/9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. “Now, how much progress do you feel the nation has made over the last year or two in coping with the problem of illegal drugs—has it made much progress, made some progress, stood still, lost some ground, or lost much ground?” (2011)</td>
<td>Much progress* 3%/7.7%</td>
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<td>(30/1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. “Do you think the use of marijuana should be made legal, or not?” (2013)</td>
<td>Yes*** 58%/73%</td>
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<td>(596/109)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. “In your view, how should juveniles between the ages of 14 and 17 who commit violent crimes be treated in the criminal justice system—should they be treated the same as adults, or should they be given more lenient treatment in a juvenile court?” (2003)</td>
<td>Same as adults*** 59%/3.4%</td>
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<td>(592/5)</td>
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(continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Responses</th>
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<tr>
<td>9. “Which of the following approaches to lowering the crime rate in the United States comes closer to your own view—do you think more money and effort should go to attacking the social and economic problems that lead to crime through better education and job training or more money and effort should go to deterring crime by improving law enforcement with more prisons, police, and judges?” (2010)</td>
<td>Social problems* 64%/87.6% (656/131)</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. For [the following] statement, please tell me if you completely agree with it, mostly agree with it, mostly disagree with it, or completely disagree with it: The criminal justice system should try to rehabilitate criminals, not just punish them.” (2003)</td>
<td>Completely agree** 29%/55.4% (372/83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. “. . . Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on dealing with drug addiction?” (2002)</td>
<td>Too much 7%/9.1% (90/14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. “In general, do you feel that the laws covering the sale of firearms should be more strict, less strict, or kept as they are now?” (2012)</td>
<td>More strict* 58%/80.1% (602/119)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. “What do you think is more important—to protect the right of Americans to own guns, or to control gun ownership?” (2013)</td>
<td>Protect gun rights*** 46%/15.3% (692/23)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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(continued)
### Table 1. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Very fair***</th>
<th>Somewhat fair</th>
<th>Somewhat unfair***</th>
<th>Very unfair</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14. In general, do you think the criminal justice system is very fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair, or very unfair in its treatment of people accused of committing crime? (2003)</td>
<td>18%/4.2%</td>
<td>48%/39.6%</td>
<td>22%/43.1%</td>
<td>10%/13.2%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(181/6)</td>
<td>(482/59)</td>
<td>(221/64)</td>
<td>(100/20)</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. “Please tell me how you would rate the honesty and ethical standards of people in these different fields—very high, high, average, low, or very low: Police officers?” (2012)</td>
<td>Very high***</td>
<td>High***</td>
<td>Average***</td>
<td>Low*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14%/4.9%</td>
<td>44%/28.9%</td>
<td>32%/56.3%</td>
<td>7%/3.5%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(142/7)</td>
<td>(447/43)</td>
<td>(325/84)</td>
<td>(71/5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. Please tell me how you would rate the honesty and ethical standards of people in these different fields—very high, high, average, low, or very low: Judges?” (2010)</td>
<td>Very high</td>
<td>High*</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Low***</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10%/8%</td>
<td>37%/47.1%</td>
<td>37%/37%</td>
<td>11%/2.9%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(104/12)</td>
<td>(384/70)</td>
<td>(384/55)</td>
<td>(114/4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. “In order to curb terrorism in this country, do you think it will be necessary for the average person to give up some civil liberties, or not?” (2011)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>DK*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40%/41.1%</td>
<td>54%/50%</td>
<td>(604/61)</td>
<td>(815/75)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(604/61)</td>
<td>(815/75)</td>
<td>(91/13)</td>
<td>(12/1)</td>
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</table>

Note. Non-responses by both groups and/or “volunteered” answers of “Don’t Know” by the general public in questions without that answer option mean some percentages do not add to 100 percent.

*Most recent available comparison year for the general public in parentheses.

*Percentage of general public/percentage of criminologists.

*n of general public/n of criminologists.

*DK” = “Don’t Know” as an offered option in the Sourcebook wordings to respondents.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
Question 5: Is there more crime in the United States than there was a year ago, or less?

Question 6: Now, how much progress do you feel the nation has made over the last year in coping with the problem of illegal drugs—has it made much progress, made some progress, stood still, lost some ground, or lost much ground?

Once again, there is a sharp contrast between what members of the public report compared to criminologists. While for the most recent data year (2011) the general public overwhelmingly reported they believed crime has increased (68%), only 6.2% of criminologists agreed (Sourcebook Table 2.33). These results are consistent with concerns that the general public’s perception of crime is far more likely to be driven by media images suggestive of ever-increasing levels of danger from criminal threats (Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz, 1997; Kappeler & Potter, 2005; Surette, 2011). Criminologists, by contrast, are more likely aware of compelling evidence from official statistics—often discussed at length by analysts within the field—of an ongoing and remarkable drop in overall levels of crime in the United States since the early 1990s (Blumstein & Wallman, 2005; Zimring, 2006).

For Question 6, while neither the public nor criminologists reported high levels of confidence in the success of current drug policy, the public was actually more skeptical. The omnibus chi-square results are significant but are primarily driven by the difference in responses between the general public in criminologists on the two most negative answers. Specifically, in 2011, 21% of the general public, versus 15.6% of criminologists in our sample, reported they believed current drug policies have “lost some ground,” while 14% of the general public versus 6.1% of criminologists reported they believed current drug policies have “lost much ground” (Sourcebook Table 2.44). In addition, criminologists were far more likely to not have any opinion on this matter, with 16.3% of them reporting they had no opinion, while only 3% of the public chose this option.

These results could indicate the influence of common media images of drug abuse or the glorification of drug crime in popular TV and film has disabused the general public of any belief that the so-called war on drugs has succeeded. However, this does not necessarily mean the general public would support a discontinuation of current drug interdiction policies. It could simply mean that most respondents among the general public want to fight illegal drugs but do not think current policies have gone far enough.

Question 7: Do you believe the use of marijuana should be made legal, or not?

In 2013, the majority of even the general public reported that the use of marijuana should be legalized (Sourcebook Table 2.67). However, the omnibus chi-square results still show a significant difference between the general public and academic criminologists on this issue, because while 58% of the public supports the legalization of marijuana use, a far greater majority of responding criminologists (73%) responded thus, and while 39% of the general public did not support the legalization of marijuana use, only 14.2% of responding academic criminologists selected this option.
It is worth noting that the 58% figure for the general public is far higher than had been in the earlier years of the survey. In 1969, the first data year available in the Sourcebook, only 12% of the responding public reported support for legalizing marijuana (Table 2.67). That suggests public opinion regarding marijuana in particular and drug policy in general might have softened in recent years, and this speculation is bolstered by the recent legalization of recreational marijuana in some states and ballot measures to legalize it in others. However, the public’s attitude toward marijuana specifically remains less “liberal” than that of academic criminologists.

Other Items

Similar findings (more “liberal” views for CCJ scholars) were found for almost all of the other items administered in the survey. Academic criminologists were more likely to support a liberal views than the general public regarding the treatment of juveniles. In response to Question 8—whether juveniles who commit violent felonies should be processed like adults), 59% of the general public in 2010 saying they should be (Sourcebook Table 2.48), while an almost identical 57.8% of responding criminologists saying juveniles should be treated more leniently than adults. When asked whether limited social resources should be prioritized for social problems versus law enforcement in addressing crime, both the general public and academic criminologists overwhelmingly supported addressing social problems. However, academic criminologists’ preference for addressing social problems was still significantly higher (87.6%) than that of the general public (64%; Sourcebook Table 2.28). Furthermore, 32% of the public versus 6.9% of academic criminologists supported more law enforcement, again confirming our hypotheses (Table 2.28).

The more liberal configuration of academic criminologists was even more profound on Question 10, which addresses what the priorities of the criminal justice system should be. Overwhelmingly, academic criminologists were more likely to completely agree that the system should focus on rehabilitation, whereas only 29% of the public in 2003 felt the same (Sourcebook Table 2.46). Similarly, criminologists were far less likely than the general public to believe sufficient resources are invested in treating drug addiction (Question 11). Nonetheless, it should be noted that a majority of both the general public (74%) and academic criminologist respondents (93.3%) either completely or mostly agreed that the system should focus on rehabilitation (Table 2.46).

Significantly higher percentages of academic criminologists believe current gun laws should be stricter (Question 12). Academics were also significantly more likely to indicate that controlling access to firearms was more important than preserving individual gun ownership rights (Question 13; see Sourcebook Tables 2.63, 2.0018). Again, the findings strongly confirm our hypothesis of greater liberalism among CCJ scholars relative to the general public.

With regard to overall assessments of the “fairness” of the justice system, academic criminologists were far less likely than the general public to report they felt the system was “very fair” and far more likely to indicate they believed the system was
“somewhat unfair” (Question 14; Sourcebook Table 2.45). We believe the responses for Questions 15 and 16, which tap respondents’ assessment of the honesty and ethical standards of police officers and judges, are conceptually related. In fact, academic criminologists were more likely to view police officers as average in terms of their honesty and ethics but were more likely to view judges as honest and ethical relative to the general public (Sourcebook Tables 2.17, 2.0016, 2.20, 2.18). We speculate this latter finding might reflect a perception on the part of the academy that judges are, on average, a more educated and fair-minded profession within the justice system, and possibly by virtue of their professional position more likely to be socialized into the presumption of equitable treatment in the court system.

The one item where no significant omnibus difference was found between CCJ scholars and the general public was in Question 17. Here, both CCJ scholars and the general public were nearly evenly divided on the question of whether Americans would be required to forfeit civil liberties to effectively fight terrorism. For the potentially curious reader, we further examined how this comparison might have changed since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. In fact, and not surprisingly, public acceptance of additional civil liberties restrictions was much higher in mid-September 2001 and into spring 2002, holding steady at 55% for both polling periods (Sourcebook Table 2.31). This is significantly higher than the 40% of the general public favoring such restrictions in 2011.

In sum, the results confirmed both of our death-penalty-specific and more general research hypotheses. First, our specific hypothesis that CCJ scholars are less supportive of and invest less faith in the efficacy of, the death penalty was clearly confirmed, and the findings were completely consistent with prior literature examining criminologists’ views of the death penalty. The findings also clearly support our more general hypothesis that CCJ scholars are more liberal in their views regarding crime and justice issues than the general public, with the latter demonstrating clearly more punitive attitudes on issues such as marijuana legalization, the treatment of juveniles in felony courts, and where social and justice system priorities should be focused. We also confirmed that responding CCJ scholars were more liberal than the general public on their views on gun control and the overall equity of the justice system. We imagine few would find these results surprising, as, following Radelet and Akers (1996), we agree that more education and awareness of crime issues likely correlates with a due process orientation on crime policy. However, other than the findings for the death penalty, these results are the first formal quantification of a sharp disconnect between expert and public opinion on a broad array of crime and justice issues. Now that we have shown these contrasts, we turn our attention for the implications for addressing the public versus expert divide in how it arguably influences policy decisions.

Policy Implications

As introduced above, conservative versus liberal positions do significantly change what crime policies and practices are promoted and supported. Whereas liberal leaning CCJ scholars might recommend due process models and rehabilitation programs
and providing resources to those ends, legislators, following public opinion, might prefer to provide more resources to incarceration and voice support for the death penalty. A key point we want to make here is that we do not intend our results to be interpreted as a dichotomized endorsement of the former and condemnation of the latter, or that “conservative” is synonymous with uninformed and “wrong.” Exceptionally brutal offenders targeting exceptionally compelling victims inspire arguably quite defensible “conservative” crime control in some cases. However, if those uncommon brutal cases dominate the general public’s image of “crime” and “criminal,” then the reliance on public opinion data skewed toward “conservative” viewpoints can promote excessive and ineffective crime policy created in the absence of any consideration of the long-term costs or consequences of those programs. Thus, we argue better crime policy has to come from more productive dialogues to bridge the gap between public and expert opinion, and understanding how and why public and expert divergence of opinion can better help us understand how to bridge that gap. In this, we recommend the following considerations for researchers and legislators: (a) understand the influences on public and expert opinion formation to promote more empirical evidence in public discourse; (b) further explore how CCJ scholars can go “public” with their research to influence public policy; and (c) reconsider polling and survey measures to obtain more nuanced information about attitudes toward crime policy.

We recognize the divide between public and expert opinions on crime is largely derived from the information sources influencing opinion: To state bluntly, the opinions of average citizens are far more influenced by Law and Order than Criminology or Justice Quarterly. Media research has shown that prime-time programming and simplistic news media frames highlighting stereotypical criminals, focusing on sensationalized crimes, and resolving crime bluntly through punitive solutions influence heavy television viewers to hold more prejudiced attitudes and exaggerated views of the prevalence of violence in society (for review of these studies, see Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001). Many crime entertainment programs emphasize criminals’ personal responsibilities for their actions, ignore societal structures related to those crimes, and ultimately shape audience attitudes to take hardline stances associated with conservative viewpoints (Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001). CCJ scholars, by contrast, are exposed to different information, and thus are less likely to believe simplistic characterizations of offenders, are more likely aware that the vast majority of murderers, for example, do not fit the “predator” narrative, and that questionable evidence in marginal cases has very likely led to wrongful conviction and the execution of innocents. As media effects research has shown, changing narrative frames and information presented through TV programs and news does influence and change public attitudes on crime; thus, efforts to “fact-check” or create programming on more realistic portrayals of crime could influence public (and legislator) opinion to better reflect and understanding of the complex nature of crime.

Relatedly, CCJ scholars arguably need to make efforts to make their work relevant to inform public audiences and/or make efforts to be included in deliberations regarding crime policy. Currie (2007) made this point forcefully when calling for a more “public criminology”: If CCJ scholars talk only among themselves in academic
journals, and there is neither incentive for, nor professional-cultural inclination toward, public engagement, then why do these fields even exist? What is the value of academic “knowledge” if that knowledge is rarely shared in the very public arena in which its findings would be most relevant? Currie specifically calls for academic programs to reward faculty for engaging in the legislative process and criminal justice agency consultation. Rather than legislators and public policy makers seeking out CCJ scholars’ expertise, Currie places the onus on CCJ scholars to cultivate and train publicly oriented research in their programs, also supporting creation of programs for policy makers, community leaders, nonprofits, and general citizens to come together to address crime issues, but also to help define research agendas to address pressing community issues. In other words, if CCJ scholars produce publicly relevant research and initiate conversations, then this work might better influence public policy.

CCJ scholars can also go “public” through more actively engaging in public policy endeavors. This might be through public statements issued through professional organizations, the creation of professional associations similar to Physicians for Social Responsibility, or in actively petitioning or lobbying for legislative policy (see Currie, 2007). This also means CCJ scholars should include their voices more in mainstream media channels to help shift crime coverage from simplistic narrative frames and add critical analysis and explanations to understand crime (Barak, 2007). This does mean CCJ scholars should adapt and frame their information to media frames, understand the media genre they are speaking within (radio, TV, and so on), and the opinions and attitudes of the audience to whom one is speaking (Barak, 2007, p. 195). Again, “news-making criminology,” as Barak describes, can involve working in partnership with established newsmaking and media organizations or through websites, blogs, and social media to contribute to public dialogue on issues, following the example of citizen-journalists. Even if specific policy battles are lost, at least those battles will have been joined, and the lessons of those defeats could be the basis for more effective future engagement.

Finally, we should also look at the influence and educational potential of polling measures themselves. Regular research such as that provided here can open space to recognize disagreement that exists between CCJ scholars and the general public and possibly promote productive discussion on policy issues. As Pratt (2008) has noted, “ownership” of the crime control issue appears to have largely shifted in recent decades from criminological technocrats to elected legislatures. Implicitly vested with the prevailing “expertise” in matters of criminal justice legislation, these elected bodies tend to reflect the policy prescriptions of their electorate. Another way of configuring Pratt’s model is that the general public acts, in essence, as its own body of crime policy “experts” through their elected proxies, and the end result has been a deluge of disinformation about effective crime control and a subsequent societal “addiction” to mass incarceration and other punitive postures. Engaging in this milieu might be a fearsome prospect for technically prodigious but socially timid criminological “eggheads” (Buckler, Griffin, & Travis, 2008), but using polling and survey mechanisms might provide the inroads necessary to turn from an exclusively public “expertise” and toward greater incorporation of academics’ perspectives on crime and justice issues.
This also requires we reconsider the polling questions routinely used and referenced for understanding where Americans stances on crime policy. A clear limitation to our study is reliance on the standard Gallup Poll questions, as we know that wording of questions itself influences responses and shapes attitudes (see Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001). The drawback to our approach of replicating Gallup Poll questions for this study is that a strong case can be made that the wordings of those particular questions are problematic, as those items overly confine respondents’ answers with simplistic question construction and thus miss nuances and complexities in how individuals view the particular issues in question. Take, for example, the question, Are you in favor of the death penalty for a person convicted of murder? Although this question might seem straightforward, it does not specify the nature of the murder for which the death penalty is contemplated. Notably, public responses on questions of appropriate punishments often show a marked contrast when “global” versus “specific” attitudes are tapped (Cullen et al., 2000). Respondents who might report “global” support of the death penalty for “murderers,” for example, might be more supportive of a lesser sentence if “specific” mitigating circumstances are included in the description of the murderer. If more nuanced questions are asked and reported in news media to represent “the” publics’ views, then that information can in turn influence legislator and public opinion.

We emphasize it is not our intention to foment cynicism about the relationship between expert and popular views on crime and justice issues, and recognize that better crime policy (and understanding of crime issues) relies on collaborations between CCJ scholars, legislators, and the public. We believe the general public does hold more complex views than polling data might suggest, which also means that it is possible to have productive dialogue for better policy. For example, on the question of whether to legalize marijuana, majorities of general public respondents still took a liberal position—even if that majority was lower than in our sample of CCJ scholars (Sourcebook Table 2.67). This by itself suggests Americans’ views of these issues, even if they seem ill-informed from experts’ perspectives, are still complex and possibly amenable to expert criminological input—if that input is forthcoming.

Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The research presented here is limited in a number of ways: (a) the low response rate, (b) survey type, (c) chosen expert sample, and (d) survey measure. Most obviously, the low response rate relative to earlier surveys of CCJ scholars (see Radelet & Akers, 1996) was not surprising as email surveys usually suffer from a lower response rate relative to mailed surveys (Fowler, 2009). Although the statistical comparability of the two waves of responses and their consistency with earlier survey findings on criminologists’ views of the death penalty specifically mitigate this concern, future replications of this survey could improve on its external validity by achieving higher response rates. One recommendation for an improvement on the survey results provided here would be to push for all tenure-track and tenured members of the ASC and Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences to answer these questions through an online survey on a
regular basis, say, every five years. The regularity and (hopefully) recognized use of poll data in public discourse could encourage higher response rates. The results could be publicized and compared and contrasted with popular responses in the hope of bringing those contrasts to light as noted above with how polling can educate and influence policy.

The low response rate might be in part its own finding as much as study limitation. Although the main reason for a low response rate here is probably that email surveys usually suffer from this shortcoming, part of the problem might well have been symbolized by one respondent who uses the first open forum answer space to say, “This survey is not worth my time. I cannot imagine anything useful coming from it.” This respondent declined to answer any further questions. Although this was the only such comment received from the respondents, and is thus a vast minority of them, non-respondents were a substantial majority of the sampling frame. In other words, this non-respondent might well have been speaking for a sizable proportion of the individuals surveyed but who declined to respond. Obviously, we would not have conducted the survey if we shared this individual’s assessment of its utility, but it suggests that publicizing their views on the very issues they study is simply not a preeminent priority for many CCJ scholars. This again, in our view, invites searching questions regarding the field’s relevance and purpose.

Second, a technical limitation was the mode of survey delivery. The Gallup Polls, from which the data provided in the Sourcebook are derived, are delivered via telephone to a nationally representative sample of American citizens. Our survey was delivered online because of simple resource constraints, but future surveys of CCJ scholars could account for any potential differences between and biases resulting from this by replicating this research using telephone surveys of CCJ scholars.

A third limitation is that the survey was restricted to CCJ scholars in PhD-granting institutions, owing to resource constraints and the tenuous assumption that such scholars, on average, represent the “elite” of their field. However, for two reasons any future replications of this survey would do well to include academics at institutions granting lesser degrees in criminology and related fields. First, the majority of students in those fields do not gain degrees past their associates or bachelors, and thus the bulk of the intellectual influence exercised over most criminal justice practitioners by CCJ scholars is probably at those “lower” levels. Second, individual CCJ scholars not at PhD-granting institutions might still have outstanding expertise on one or more of the particular topics posed in our survey, and thereby merit inclusion in any survey attempting to tap “expert” opinion.

Fourth, our survey is limited to CCJ scholars to the exclusion of other academic disciplines, but there are many scholars in non-criminology/criminal justice PhD programs in fields such as sociology, political science, and psychology who were perforce excluded from this sample owing to the chosen sampling frame but are undoubtedly engaged in crime-related research and thus qualify as academic experts in “crime-related” fields. If being affiliated with one of these related fields somehow affects an academic’s views about crime and justice, this could indicate sample selection bias and threaten external validity. Take, for example, economics, with its proclivity to
analyze human behavior in terms of rewards and punishments. This field has produced some work suggesting, for example, that the death penalty does in fact serve as a deterrent against murder, even if criminologists overwhelmingly reject this view (for a review of this work in economics, see Radelet & Lacock, 2008). Why, a member of this camp could reasonably ask, should criminology be granted a de facto monopoly on the right to claim “expert” status regarding issues such as the effectiveness of the death penalty?

Furthermore, skeptics could rightly question whether respondents to our survey were simply parroting the accepted orthodoxies of the fields of CCJ rather than opinions derived from an open-minded evaluation of all the available evidence on the particular questions asked. We acknowledge that CCJ responses might be biased or under an ideological “hegemony” owing simply to the dominance of sociological training (with a preference for structural explanations of, and prospective solutions for, deviance) of the majority of its members (see Cooper et al., 2010). Furthermore, there is no reason to believe our CCJ respondents are homogenous in their level of expertise on the specific topics tapped by the survey instrument used, yet our results treat them as such. Again, this is owing to our purpose to compare CCJ experts to public opinion, and we treat this group the same as those in the public (where expertise is not assessed as part of the Gallup Poll). More nuanced research would account for comparison of expertise within the field, between disciplines, or would more directly address Radelet and Acker’s (1996) point that more education on criminal justice topics would shift opinion. Such research would open space for further discussion about crime policy, who qualifies as a crime policy expert (in and outside of the field), as well as how expert opinion influences (or not) crime legislation. Still, in defense of the findings presented here, it should be remembered that when the Gallup Polls are administered, it is because there is presumed value in knowing what the public thinks, regardless of their level of qualification for thinking it. If those public opinions are of some social value, would not the views of CCJ scholars also be of (at least some) value?

In our effort to compare public opinion with CCJ expert opinion and in using the Gallup Poll as a recognized measure of opinion, we also recognize the use of Gallup Poll questions also as a limitation as the question wordings are problematic and less nuanced than other measures such as the General Social Survey (NORC, n.d.). The potential limitations of the specific item wordings was unavoidable if the purpose of the study—comparing CCJ scholars and the public—was to be achieved. Furthermore, even if some nuance is lost, the general conclusion—that CCJ scholars are more liberal than the public on main crime policy issues—seems to be a very safe one. Nonetheless, future replications of this type of research can (and should) include questions from other survey measures.

Creating new survey measures also indicates a clear direction for future research. CCJ scholars, such as those responding to our survey, arguably already understand the complexities of crime and the justice system and likely answered the general questions we used from the vantage of that understanding. Respondents from the general public, however, only lessen their punitive views when those complexities are built into the
questions (Cullen et al., 2000). Does this mean the differences between the general public and CCJ scholars would start to disappear if the two groups of respondents were compared using nuanced questions? If so, that would suggest the public is amenable to “education” on these issues and that the striking differences between academics and the public in their views of crime and justice found in the results presented here occur precisely because the public generally lacks that education. This only naturally revisits the crucial questions: Is this a problem requiring solution? Upon whom does the burden lie to provide that education? If not CCJ scholars, then who? Ultimately, this is a value judgment which individuals in the fields of criminal justice and criminology must decide for themselves. If future research comparing criminologists’ views with those of the general public are consistent with the admittedly limited findings presented here, then possibly it is time for crime experts to collectively have that discussion, of which this study is merely a beginning.

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Notes
1. Our public opinion data come from poll data cataloged in the Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics (University at Albany, 2015).
2. To clarify, we are not attempting to provide a sociological or demographic explanation as to why the public’s views fit in our definition of “conservative” policy positions or why criminology and criminal justice (CCJ) scholars aligned with more “liberal” policy positions. Our purpose here is to compare the opinions/beliefs of the public and CCJ experts using the categories of “conservative” and “liberal” as the operational definition of where policy positions align.
3. The fourth author was unable to find publicly available emails for the faculty for one of the institutions mentioned—Texas Southern—so it was perforce excluded from the analysis.
4. Owing to simple oversight, one set of questions—regarding perceptions of the prevalence and justifiability of racial profiling—was discarded from the analysis. They had been errantly administered to CCJ scholars with a “Don’t Know” option not present in Sourcebook data.
5. We acknowledge the wordings of these particular public opinion items are arguably problematic, but their use is unavoidable if the direct statistical comparisons of public and expert views we intend is to be made. We address this issue further when discussing directions for future research.
6. These questions are actually presented to the public in matrix form but have been presented as stand-alone items Table 1. Also, we eliminated the question asking respondents’ views of the ethical grounding of attorneys as there were no reference data on the public available in the Sourcebook.

7. The questions asked define the problem at hand and direct our decision-making processes (see Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001). We do not present this as using polling to bias or unduly influence the public, but recognize we can define crime and options for policy options beyond dichotomized conservative versus liberal options by including more options and nuance into the polling itself. As reporting of polling data has been used in misleading ways for some issues (for example with abortion opinions, see Culp-Ressler, 2015), we see polling as a means to correct misleading information as well.

References


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