

# HOW STATE-LEVEL RACIAL DISPARITIES IN INCARCERATION IMPACT INDIVIDUALS' ATTITUDES ABOUT THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

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## ABSTRACT

Black and White individuals have different experiences with criminal justice actors and are incarcerated at strikingly different rates. However, these disparities in incarceration rates vary greatly between states. Using a national survey, we examine the relationship between states' levels of Black-White disparity in imprisonment and individuals' (1) perceptions of the fairness of the criminal justice system and (2) support for punitive criminal justice policies. We find that increasing levels of racial disparity causes Blacks to view the system as less fair while Whites' views are unaffected. However, these disparities have minimal impact on the existing gaps between Whites' and Blacks' policy preferences.

## DATA AND METHODS

### Data Sources

- Race and the Carceral State Survey
- 2016 Bureau of Justice Statistics
- Updated Sentencing Project data

### Analysis: Linear Regression Models

#### Dependent Variables

- Fairness scale: Additive index of 8 items
- Support for funding public defenders
- Support for eliminating benefits for felons
- Support for disenfranchising felons

#### Independent Variables

- Respondent race
- Racial disparity in incarceration by state

*Covariates: Income, education, birth year, party ID, prior incarceration, past felony*

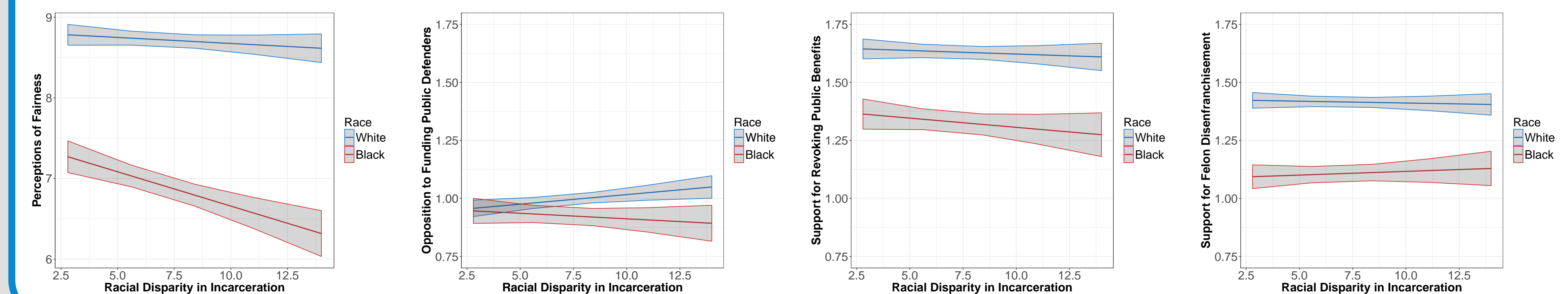
## RESULTS: STATE DISPARITIES IMPACT FAIRNESS RATINGS

For each of our dependent variables, we use a linear regression model to test for the interaction between respondent race and state racial disparities in incarceration ("RDI") levels. For each dependent variable, we predict that, as RDI increases, Whites will view the system as more fair and increase their support for punitive policies whereas Blacks will view it as less fair and decrease their support.

[1] As RDI increases, Blacks view the criminal justice system as less fair while Whites' views are unaffected. This finding partially aligns with our hypothesis, and the effect is a decrease of one point on a 16-point scale.

[2] As RDI increases, Blacks become significantly more willing to fund public defenders while Whites become less supportive. However, the effect size is too small to have practical significance.

[3] Although Whites are much more supportive of felon disenfranchisement and for eliminating public benefits for felons, the gap between the groups remains constant as RDI increases, demonstrating that the effect of the interaction is insignificant. This finding runs counter to our predictions and indicates that individuals derive views on these controversial policies from sources beyond state politics.



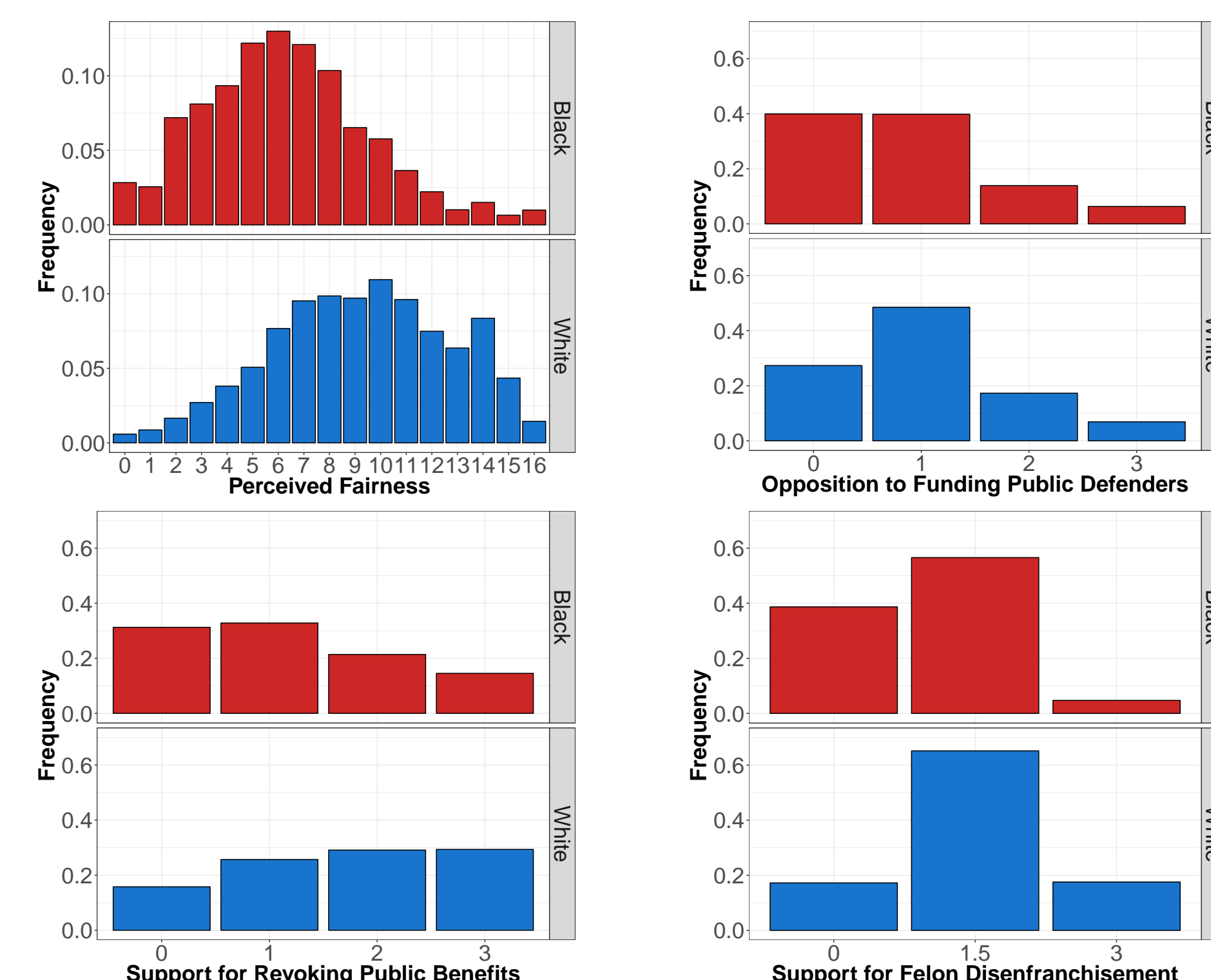
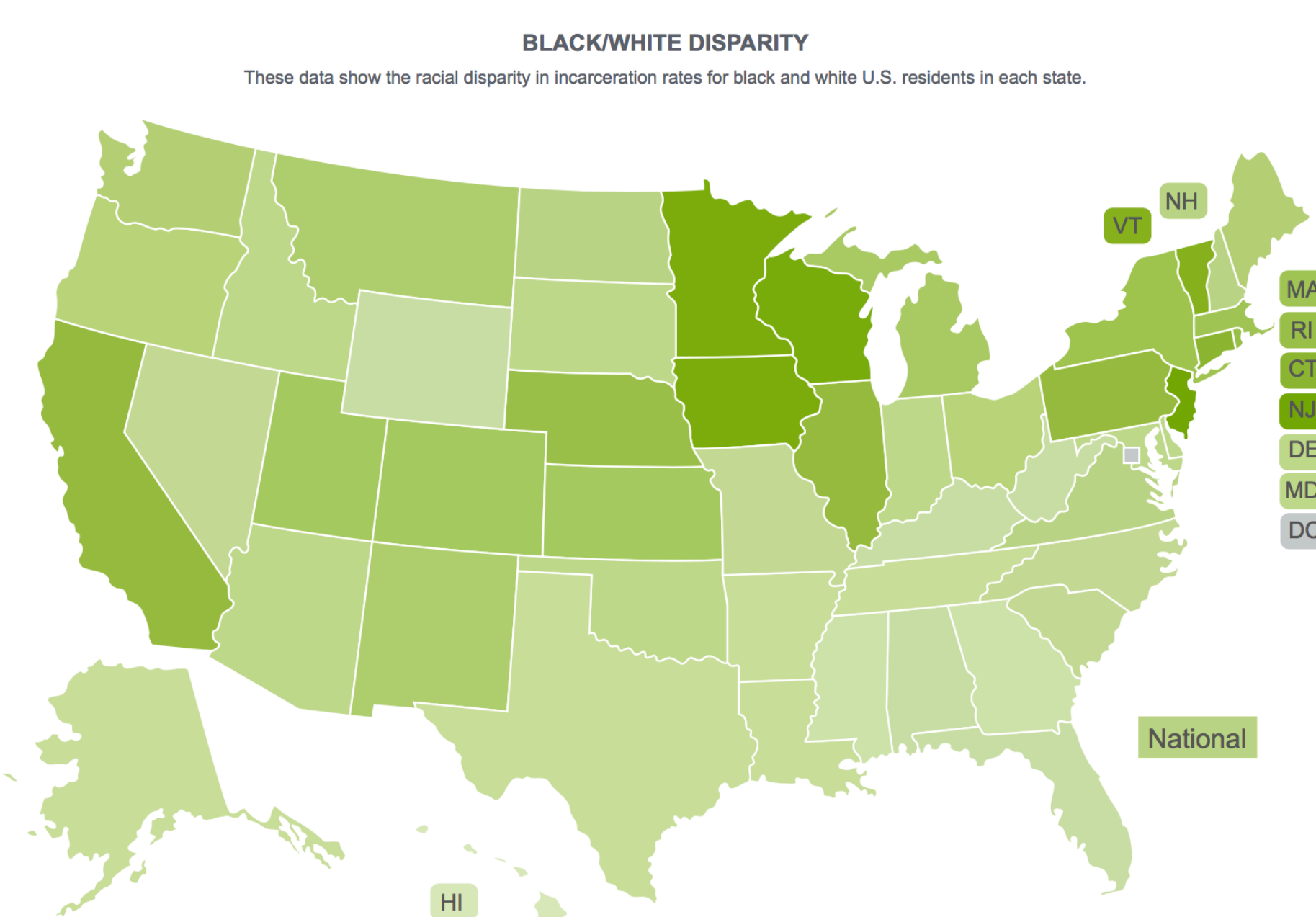
## THEORY AND DESCRIPTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

### How do incarceration disparities impact perceptions of fairness and policy support?

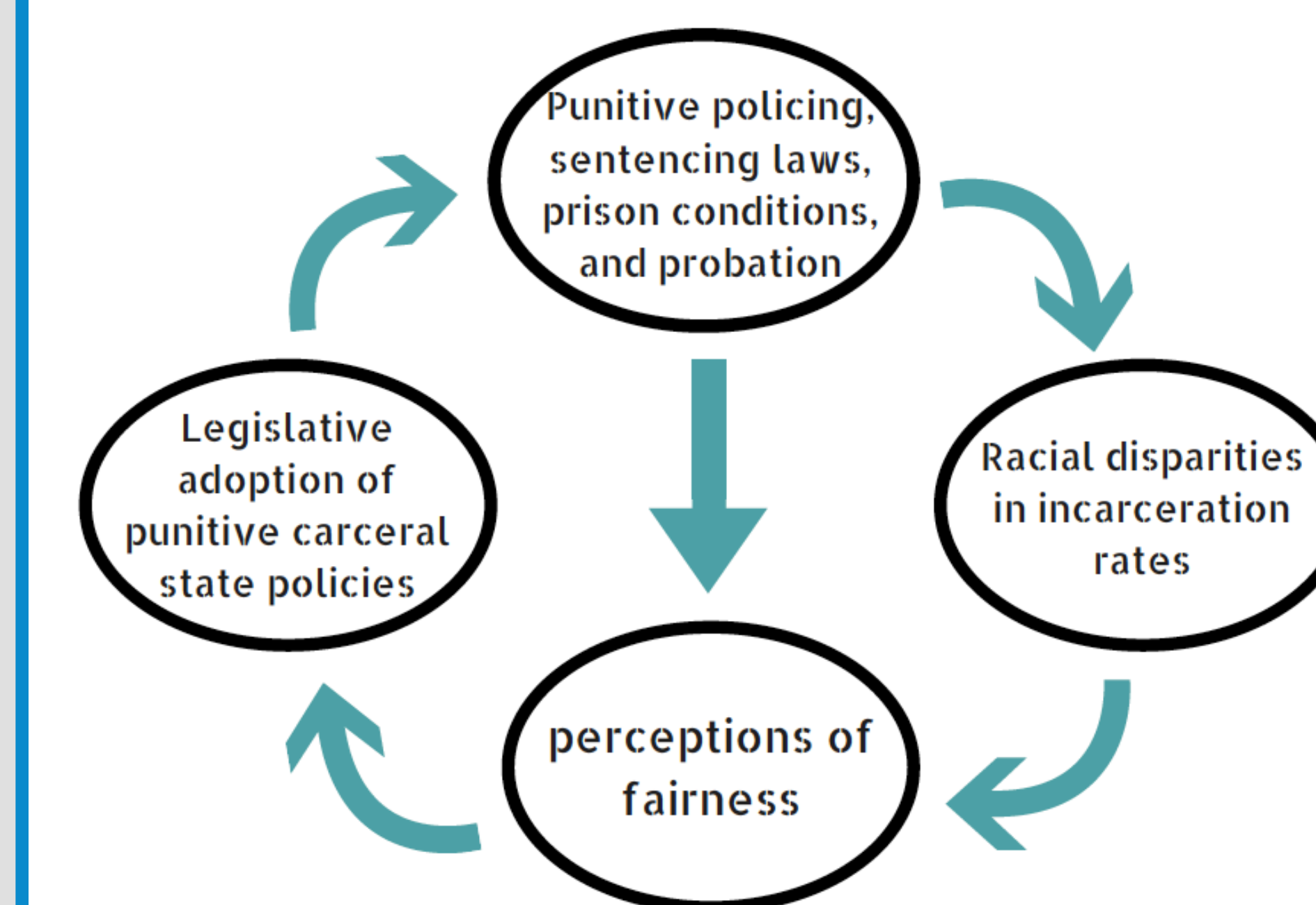
The same criminal justice practices that lead to Blacks facing disproportionate incarceration rates also cause them to more frequently have negative interactions with custodial authorities (1)(2). Yet, although research indicates that these personal experiences shape citizens' views on the justice system (3), we are interested in the relationship between state-level disparities and attitudes. Finding that increased disparity leads Blacks

and Whites to be more & less concerned about the system's fairness would support the notion that criminal justice practices are an important part of political socialization (1). Given findings on how prisons' racial makeup impacts Whites' support for punitive policies (4)(5), we are also interested in whether disparities predict racial groups' policy preferences.

### Racial Disparity in Incarceration by State (6) and Distribution of Dependent Variables



## CONCLUSION



[1] To the extent that public opinion impacts the way policymakers structure the justice system, perceptions of fairness can be self-reinforcing. While Whites continue to support punitive policies, Blacks in areas with greater disparities may experience reduced political efficacy.

[2] In addition to changing policies that lead to racial disparities, activists and policymakers can also focus on changing the ways in which minority populations interact with criminal justice actors.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Weaver & Lerman. "Political Consequences of the Carceral State." [2] Soss & Weaver "Police Are Our Government." [3] Unnever. "Two Worlds Far Apart." [4] Hetey & Eberhardt. "Racial Disparities in Incarceration." [5] Percival. "Testing the Impact of Racial Attitudes." [6] The Sentencing Project "State-by-State Data"

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