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Race and Support for the Criminal Justice System:

A Matter of Asymmetry

Yesilernis L. Peña

Christopher Federico

Jim Sidanius

University of California, Los Angeles

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Author Note

We would like to thank Yuen Huo for her comments and assistance. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Yesilernis Peña, Department of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles, 405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563. Electronic mail may be sent to [yesil@ucla.edu](mailto:yesil@ucla.edu).

Abstract

Using a random sample of White- and Black-Americans from Los Angeles County, we explored the relationship between race, social class, group dominance orientation and support for the criminal-justice system. Besides finding less overall support for the police and the criminal-justice system among Blacks than among Whites, we also found evidence of two other forms of racial asymmetry regarding the criminal-justice system. The relationship between support for the criminal-justice system and social class was moderated by race; in contrast to Whites, support among Blacks for the criminal-justice system decreased with increasing socio-economic status. Finally, there was also evidence of asymmetry in the relationship between support for the criminal-justice system and group dominance orientation as a function of race. Thus, support for aggressive law-enforcement strategies was more strongly associated with group dominance orientation among Whites than among Blacks. The theoretical implications of these results are discussed.

## Race and Support for the Criminal-Justice System:

### A Matter of Asymmetry

It is well-known that the United States has one of the highest crime rates in the world. What is less well-known is that ethnic minorities in the United States are substantially more likely to be victimized by crime than are Whites. For example, between 1973 and 1999, African-Americans were on 89% more likely to be victimized by violent crime of all types than European Americans. This higher rate of crime victimization includes all major crime categories such as homicide, rape, robbery and aggravated assault (see Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). Assuming that support for crime control increases as the probability of crime victimization increases, one might thus expect Blacks to be substantially more supportive of strong police efforts to prevent crime and apprehend criminals than Whites. As well as being intuitively compelling, this expectation is also consistent with perspectives in public-opinion research which emphasize the role of victimization fears in the genesis of criminal-justice attitudes (e.g., Apple & O'Brien, 1983; Priest & Carter, 1999; Seltzer & McCormick, 1987; see also Laver, 1981).

### A Group-Dominance Approach to Criminal-Justice Attitudes

While a general “crime control” perspective of this sort would lead one to expect greater support for aggressive crime measures among those most victimized by crime (e.g., African Americans), an approach broadly referred to as the general group dominance perspective (see Sidanius & Federico, in press; Sidanius et al., 1996; Jackman, 1994) leads to entirely different predictions. Although this approach takes a number of specific forms, all of its variants share a number of common assumptions, including (1) the notion that societies tend to be organized as hierarchies of groups differing in power and status, (2) that

certain social institutions play a key role in preserving these hierarchies, and (3) the argument that different groups' attitudes toward these institutions often reflect an underlying dynamic of intergroup competition.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, from a general group dominance perspective, the police and internal security forces function not only to prevent crime and maintain general order, but also to maintain and reinforce the hierarchical order of power relationships between dominant and subordinate groups within the social system. According to this perspective, while there are many instances in which "justice" might be applied in a neutral and unbiased manner, *in the limit* justice will be dispensed in ways which disproportionately benefit the powerful and punish the powerless, everything else being equal. In fact, several variants of the group-dominance approach consider the police and other internal-security organizations to be premier exemplars of "hierarchy-enhancing" social institutions (see Sidanius & Pratto, 2001, ch. 8; Sinclair, Pratto, Sinclair & van Laar, 1996; see also Chevigny, 1995). In this vein, the group-dominance approach argues that police and internal security forces reinforce existing systems of intergroup hierarchy by subjecting members of subordinate social groups to greater levels of disrespect, punitiveness, and brutality than members of dominant groups. Thus, rather than being noteworthy exceptions to a general pattern of equal treatment under the law, events like the 1992 police beating of Rodney King can all be regarded as extreme and well-publicized instances of a more general pattern of institutionalized discrimination (see Sidanius & Pratto, 2001).

For example, in support of this general argument, Sidanius and Pratto (2001) have shown that members of subordinate social groups were more likely to receive relatively severe treatment by the criminal-justice system during all phases of the criminal-justice process. Controlling for the severity of the offense and other legally relevant factors, compared to dominants, subordinates are: (1) more likely to be

arrested, (2) more likely to face severe criminal charges, (3) more likely to be given very high bails, (4) more likely to be convicted, (5) once convicted, more likely to be given severe sentences, and (6) less likely to be offered plea bargains, probation, early release, or parole (see also Cole, 1999; Mauer, 1999; Miller, 1996; Parenti, 1999; Tonry, 1995; see also Kennedy, 1998; Nelson, 2000). Furthermore, the differential treatment of dominants and subordinates by the criminal-justice system is not restricted to any particular social or political system, but has also been observed across a broad range of nations and political systems, including Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Finland, Holland, Israel, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States and Zaire (see Chevigny, 1995; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). Moreover, consistent with this dominance-centered view of the police and internal security organizations, research has also found that, compared to the average citizen and controlling for a range of demographic factors, police officers have particularly high levels of social dominance orientation (SDO), i.e., a desire to establish and maintain hierarchical relations among social groups (see Sidanius, Liu, Pratto & Shaw, 1994). Similarly, using two independent samples of college students, Sidanius and his colleagues have also found that the perceived attractiveness of a police career was positively correlated with the students' level of social dominance orientation, even after controlling for demographic variables and political conservatism (Sidanius, Pratto, Sinclair, van Laar, 1996).

#### Black-White Differences in Support for the Criminal-Justice System

Given patterns such as these, there is strong reason to expect members of subordinate groups to regard criminal-justice institutions with higher levels of suspicion, cynicism, and fear than will members of dominant groups. Consistent with this reasoning, an extensive body of research suggests that ethnic minorities are significantly more likely to fear the police and disapprove of their overall performance (Carter,

1985; Davis, 1990; Decker, 1981; Flanagan & Vaughn, 1996; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001; Smith, Graham, & Adams, 1991; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997; Webb & Marshall, 1995). This suspicion appears to extend to the use of aggressive law-enforcement strategies and harsh criminal sanctions as well. For example, despite the fact that Blacks are much more likely to be victims of capital crimes, a consistent body of evidence shows that Blacks are significantly less supportive of the death penalty than are Whites (see Glenn, 1974-1975; Young, 1992).

However, other perspectives suggest that these findings – which, on the surface, may appear to support group-dominance predictions – may be explicable without reference to repressive policies in the service of hierarchy maintenance. More precisely, some researchers have suggested that higher rates of crime in minority communities may lead to more frequent contact between police and citizens in these areas, increasing the probability of negative interactions with law-enforcement officers. These negative experiences should, in turn, lead to greater disapproval of the police and the criminal-justice system (Smith et al., 1991; Thomas & Hyman, 1977). If this alternative perspective is correct, one might also expect the Black-White gap in support for the criminal-justice system to attenuate with increasing levels of socio-economic status. That is, among the relatively well-off, residence in neighborhoods with lower rates of crime and police contact may reduce the likelihood of negative interactions with the police, resulting in improved evaluations of law enforcement among both Blacks and Whites. Nevertheless, while not ruling out this possibility altogether, the general group-dominance model suggests that it may be attenuated by the fact that well-off members of subordinate groups are more likely than other subordinates to compare their outcomes with those received by dominants, thereby increasing dissatisfaction with the hierarchical status quo (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; see also Bobo et al., 1992; Sears & McConahay, 1973). In other words, successful,

intellectually-sophisticated middle-class Blacks may be more aware of racial discrimination in law-enforcement and other domains, leading to higher levels of disaffection (see also Sears & McConahay, 1973). Consistent with this expectation, recent analyses of public opinion suggests that the Black-White difference in support for the criminal-justice system actually increases with income (Bobo et al., 1992; Cose, 1993; Hochschild, 1995). Given these conflicting results, one of our other goals shall be to explore the ways in which class may condition the effects of race on attitudes toward the criminal-justice system.

#### The Ideological Asymmetry Hypothesis

In addition to expecting greater support from the criminal-justice system among dominants rather subordinates – especially among the more socially successful – the group-dominance perspective also suggests a more subtle attitudinal difference between dominants and subordinates with regard to criminal-justice attitudes. If the police and the criminal-justice systems do, indeed, help reinforce existing systems of inequality, then support for these institutions should also be differentially associated with desire for group-based dominance across levels of a given group hierarchy. That is, if the criminal-justice system does help to maintain unequal relationships between dominants (i.e., Whites) and subordinates (i.e., Blacks) in American society, then support for the police and the criminal-justice system should be more positively correlated with a desire to establish and maintain group-based social hierarchies among Whites than among Blacks. This general prediction has been referred to as the ideological asymmetry hypothesis, and studies have found evidence for it in a variety of other contexts, including attitudes toward interracial dating, anti-discrimination policies, and group affect (Levin, Sidanius, Rabinowitz, & Federico, 1998; Fang, Sidanius, & Pratto, 1998; Mitchell & Sidanius, 1993; Sidanius et al, 2001; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001).<sup>2</sup> Thus, in a final effort to explore the role of group dominance, we will also attempt to determine whether this pattern

extends to the domain of criminal justice attitudes.

### Overview and Hypotheses

Using the general group-dominance perspective as our organizing framework (see Sidanius et al., 1996; Sidanius & Pratto, in press), we examined three distinct, but related, hypotheses about asymmetries between Black and White attitudes toward the police and the broader criminal-justice system. First, we re-visited the group-dominance model's prediction that Blacks should be less supportive of the police and criminal-justice system than Whites. In this analysis, we began by replicating the findings that Blacks tend to be less supportive of the police and the death penalty, and followed up by examining Black-White differences in attitudes toward three other criminal-justice concerns – namely, “three-strikes” laws, spending for prison construction, and willingness to give police a “free rein” in combating gangs. Second, we examined the relationship between support for the criminal-justice system and social class as a function of race. If the alternative “criminality” interpretation of the first set of Black/White differences is correct, support for the criminal-justice system should increase as a function of socio-economic status among Blacks, given the lower crime in higher-income communities (Smith et al., 1991). In contrast, if the general group dominance perspective is correct, one should expect support for the criminal-justice system to decrease as a function of increasing socio-economic status among Blacks. In addition, this decreasing function should be found among Blacks, but not among Whites. In other words, one should find an interaction between race and social class. Finally, we examined the ideological asymmetry hypothesis in the domain of criminal-justice attitudes. If the group dominance perspective is correct, we should also expect an interaction between race and the degree to which respondents find it generally acceptable for one group to dominate others. That is, support for the criminal-justice system should increase with the perceived

acceptability of group dominance among Whites, but not among Blacks.

### Method

#### Respondents

The data for this study come from the Los Angeles County Social Survey (LACSS), conducted every year by the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) at UCLA. The LACSS is an omnibus probability survey of Los Angeles County adults, which assesses some 250 variables, including such things as demographics, feeling thermometers concerning numerous social groups, ethnic attitudes, political ideology, attributions for various social phenomena, and ethnic dispersal<sup>3</sup>. For the purposes of this project, we used only the data from our Euro- and African-American respondents. In order to have a sufficient number of Black respondents for these analyses, we pooled data from four consecutive administrations of the LACSS (i.e., 1997 through 2000). This provided us with a total sample of 1,379 respondents, 1,014 of whom were White and 365 of whom were Black. The median age of the respondents was approximately 43 years of age; 43.7 percent of the subjects were males and 56.2 percent were females.

#### Sampling Procedure

The survey, conducted by the Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing unit at ISSR, used a random-digit dialing technique to contact households for telephone interviews. These interviews were conducted by the regular ISSR interviewing staff and by trained student interviewers taking part in an undergraduate survey research methods course. (The student interviewers received a full 12 hours of training before conducting surveys.) The surveys used a twelve call-back procedure, systematically varying the day of the week and time of day before dropping any numbers from the sample. A systematic analysis of potential non-response bias, based on O'Neil's (1979) procedure, indicated no pattern of significant

non-response bias (Greenwell, Strom, and Bobo 1994).

### Variables

Besides the standard demographic factors (i.e., age, socioeconomic status, education, gender), which were available in all four samples, there were several other variables of interest, including: criminal-justice attitudes, political conservatism, fear of crime, and a general measure of group dominance. Because the response scales were not uniform across all surveys, all of the variables were recoded to a 0.00 to 1.00 scale, where 0.00 represents the lowest possible score and 1.00 represents the highest possible score.<sup>4</sup>

#### Demographic Variables

Besides respondent age, we considered four other demographic factors. Race was defined using respondents' self-report of their race and/or ethnicity; Blacks were coded as 1, and Whites were coded as 0. Socio-economic status was defined as the composite of three variables: educational achievement, annual household income and home ownership (0=rent, 1=own home). Education was defined using a standard summary index of formal schooling (e.g., no high school, high school graduate, four-year college degree, etc.). Gender was coded 0 for male and 1 for female.

#### Attitudes toward the Police and the Criminal-Justice System

We also assessed attitudes toward five different issues relating to the police and the criminal-justice system. The items used to measure these attitudes – and the samples in which they were included – are detailed below. All of the criminal justice items were coded so that high scores indicated support for the police and the criminal justice system.

Police abuse beliefs. Here the respondents were asked about the degree to which they thought police officers abused their authority. The specific question read: “Some people believe that the police

overstep their authority and abuse the rights of citizens. How often do you think this occurs?” There were four responses categories ranged from “Very often” to “Almost never.” This item was included in all four samples.

Death penalty support. This was indexed by asking respondents to indicate the degree to which they supported the death penalty for convicted murderers, on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” This measure was included in the 1997, 1998, and 1999 samples.

Support for ‘three-strikes’ laws. This was indexed by asking respondents to indicate the degree to which they supported California’s “three strikes and you’re out” law as a solution for crime. This law mandates that those convicted of three felonies will be imprisoned 25 years to life. Responses were given on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” This measure was included in the 1997, 1998, and 1999 samples.

Money for prison construction. Using a three category response scale, this was assessed by asking respondents to indicate whether spending for prison construction should be increased, decreased, or kept the same. This item was included in all four samples.

Support for giving police a ‘free rein.’ This item assessed whether or not respondents were willing to give the police unlimited latitude in controlling youth gangs. The specific question read: “Some people say that the police should be allowed to do whatever they think is necessary to control gangs in L.A. Other people say that the police should not be allowed to violate civil rights in order to control gangs. What do you think?” There was a four-point response scale ranged from (“Strongly disagree that police should do whatever they think is necessary”) to (“Strongly disagree that police should do whatever they think is necessary”). This item was included only in the 2000 sample.

### Crime Fear Variables

In addition to these police and criminal-justice attitudes, which will serve as our major dependent variables, the datasets contained attitudes about fear of crime, which are described below.

Fear of crime. This was indexed by asking: “Is there any area around here – say within a one mile radius – where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?” Responses were coded on a “yes”/ “no” basis. This item is included in the 1997-1999 samples.

Fear of random violence. This was measured using the following item: “Lately, there has been a lot of attention paid to the problem of random street violence. How serious a problem do you think random street violence is? Is it very serious, somewhat serious, or not very serious?” This item is included in the 1997-1999 samples.

### General Predispositions

In addition to the specific attitudes described above, two broader predispositions relevant to criminal-justice attitudes – political conservatism and attitudes toward group dominance – were also assessed in each of the four samples. These are described below.

Political conservatism. This was assessed by asking respondents to classify themselves into one of several political categories ranging from “Very conservative” to “Very liberal.” There were seven response categories in samples 1997-1999 and a five response categories in 2000.

Attitudes toward group dominance. The degree to which respondents found it acceptable for one group to dominate other was measured using three items from the full 16-item Social Dominance Orientation Scale (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle, 1994; for psychometric data, see Sidanius & Pratto, 2001; see also Altemeyer, 1998; McFarland & Adelson, 1996; Whitley, 1999)<sup>5</sup>. However, consistent with

the focus of the present study, rather than using these items to measure the broader construct of social dominance orientation – which involves both a preference for unequal relations between social groups and support for active attempts by certain groups to dominate others (see Sidanius & Pratto, 2001) – we only used those items which dealt specifically with the issue of groups actively dominating one another (see Sidanius & Pratto, 2001; see also Jost & Thompson, 2000). This allowed us to get a more direct look at the role of desires for group dominance in the structuring of criminal-justice attitudes. The items chosen included: (1) “It’s probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom,” (2) “Sometimes other groups must be kept in their place,” and (3) “Inferior groups should stay in their place.” Despite the short length of these scales, the reliabilities were reasonably high within each of the four samples ( $a_{1997} = .83$ ;  $a_{1998} = .74$   $a_{1999} = .76$ ,  $a_{2000} = .81$ ).<sup>6</sup>

## Results

### Criminal-Justice Attitudes and the Net Effect of Race

The simplest form of asymmetry explored was whether or not Blacks would be less supportive than Whites of the police and vigorous efforts to suppress crime. Besides simply controlling for standard demographic factors, we were also able to control for fear of crime and criminals in these analyses.

Police abuse beliefs and death-penalty support: A replication. We began by looking at two criminal-justice concerns explored by previous studies, i.e., beliefs about how abusive the police are and attitudes toward the death penalty. In order to do this, each attitude measure was regressed on the cluster of demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, education, economic status), the fear-of-crime variables (i.e., fear of walking at night, fear of random violence), political conservatism, and race. The results of these analyses are shown in the first two columns of Table 1. Starting with beliefs about the degree to which

police overstep their authority and abuse citizens, we find that Blacks take a less positive view of the police than Whites do ( $\beta = -.12, p < .001$ ), even after conservatism, fear of crime and random violence, and a variety of demographic variables are taken into consideration. Similarly, when we looked at attitudes toward the death penalty, we found that Blacks tend to be less supportive than Whites ( $\beta = -.09, p < .01$ ), net of the same set of controls.

Furthermore, these Black/White differences in crime control attitudes also extend to other criminal-justice issues not explored by previous studies. Thus, even after conservatism, fear of crime and violence, and a number of demographic variables were taken into account, we found that race significantly predicted attitudes toward each of the three additional criminal-justice attitudes, as the coefficients in the last three columns of Table 1 indicate. Compared to Whites, Blacks were less supportive of: (1) “three-strikes” laws ( $\beta = -.11, p < .001$ ), (2) increased spending on prison construction ( $\beta = -.14, p < .001$ ), and (3) giving the police unrestrained power to control gangs ( $\beta = -.15, p < .05$ ).

In an additional analysis, we created a composite index of support for the criminal-justice system, composed of respondents’ average scores across all five police and criminal-justice attitude measures.<sup>7</sup> We then regressed this composite measure on the same set of demographic and attitude measures as before (see Table 1). The results of this analysis were essentially consistent with the other findings, but they also showed that race was still a relatively important net predictor of overall support for the criminal-justice system (net of the other factors,  $\beta = -.14, p < .01$ ). Besides race, the only other variables which were consistently related to criminal-justice attitudes were education and political conservatism. Not surprisingly, net of other factors, political conservatives tended to be more supportive of harsh police and criminal-justice measures than liberals, and the well-educated tended to be less supportive of harsh police and criminal-

justice policies than the less well-educated (see Table 1).

The moderating role of socio-economic status. While these results are quite consistent with previous findings in this area, there are at least two ways to interpret these findings. One of these is the interpretation advanced by this study, i.e., that African-Americans are less supportive of the criminal-justice system because they are disproportionately subject to discrimination by this system. A second, contrasting interpretation might be referred to as the “criminality” hypothesis. As noted earlier, this interpretation suggests that higher rates of crime in minority areas may lead to more frequent contact with the police, increasing the probability of negative interactions, and – by extension – disapproval of the police and the criminal-justice system (e.g., Smith et al., 1991).

While it is difficult to definitively tease these two interpretations apart in absence of data on actual levels of criminality in our respondents’ areas of residence, we can indirectly examine them by looking at the moderating effect of socio-economic status. If the “criminality” interpretation of our findings is correct, then one should expect that dislike of the criminal-justice system should be strongest among Blacks with the greatest likelihood of coming into contact with the police and the criminal-justice system. Since it is well known that criminality and contact with the police and criminal-justice system is greater among the economically distressed and poorly educated than among the economically comfortable and well educated (e.g., Ellis & McDonald, 2001; Thompson & Norris, 1992), we should expect a positive correlation between support for the criminal-justice system and socio-economic status among Blacks. In contrast, if the general group dominance model is the more correct interpretation of the data, then one should expect an inverse relationship between support for the criminal-justice system and socio-economic status. That is, Blacks who are more economically and socially successful will be those who are most aware of the

oppressive nature of the criminal-justice system, and therefore the least supportive of this system. Furthermore, not only should there be an inverse relationship between criminal-justice system support and socio-economic status among Blacks, but this inverse relationship should be stronger among Blacks than among Whites. In other words, one should expect to find an interaction between race and socio-economic status.

To explore this possibility, we regressed the various criminal-justice indices on socio-economic status among both Blacks and Whites (see Table 2).<sup>7</sup> As can be seen in Table 2, while there was no consistent trend in the relationship between criminal-justice system support and socio-economic status among Whites, there was such a consistent trend among Blacks. Four of the six analyses showed a significant relationship between criminal-justice attitude and SES, and all four of these significant relationships were found to be negative. Thus, the greater the socio-economic status among Blacks, the less they supported further prison construction ( $b = -.18, p < .05$ ), the less their support of the “three-strikes” policy ( $b = -.22, p < .01$ ), the less they supported giving “free rein” to the police ( $b = -.30, p < .01$ ), and the less their generalized support of the criminal-justice system ( $b = -.20, p < .01$ ).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in comparing the slopes of the regressions of criminal-justice attitudes upon socio-economic status between Whites and Blacks, four of these slopes were found to be significantly more negative among Blacks than among Whites (i.e., money for prisons, belief in police abuse, support for “three strikes” and generalized criminal-justice system support). Thus, rather than attenuating racial differences in attitudes toward the police and the criminal-justice system, economic success appears to aggravate them. Given the reduced likelihood of crime and police contact among those high in socio-economic status, this pattern would seem to shed doubt (albeit indirectly) on the hypothesis that Blacks’ more negative attitudes toward the criminal-justice system

are purely a product of higher levels of criminality among Blacks.

### The Ideological Asymmetry Hypothesis

In an effort to further examine the connection between criminal-justice attitudes and the maintenance of hierarchical group structures, we turned to an issue not addressed by earlier studies: the question of whether or not a general preference for group dominance would be differentially related to attitudes toward harsh police and criminal-justice policies among Black and White respondents. Specifically, in line with the aforementioned “ideological asymmetry” hypothesis, we expected group dominance to be more positively related to support for these policies among Whites than among Blacks. In order to explore this question, we performed six separate regression analyses, in which each of the criminal-justice variables was simultaneously regressed on both group dominance and political conservatism. We included political conservatism in these analyses to assure ourselves that any effect of group dominance would be independent of this ‘race-neutral’ political factor (cf. Federico & Sidanius, in press).

The results of these analyses are shown in Table 3. Not surprisingly, they indicate that, among both Blacks and Whites, conservatism tended to be positively associated with support for harsh police and criminal-justice measures such as the death penalty ( $b = .27$ ,  $p < .001$ , among Whites;  $b = .21$ ,  $p < .01$ , among Blacks), and “three-strikes” laws ( $b = .24$ ,  $p < .001$ , among Whites;  $b = .22$ ,  $p < .01$ , among Blacks), as well as generalized support for the criminal-justice system ( $b = .14$ ,  $p < .001$  among Whites;  $b = .08$ ,  $p < .10$  among Blacks).

However, when we looked at the relationship between criminal-justice attitudes and respondents’ attitudes toward group dominance, we found a somewhat different picture. As the coefficients in Table 3 indicate, net of the effects of political conservatism, support for harsh police and criminal-justice policies

tended to be positively associated with group dominance only among Whites. More precisely, among Whites, the greater one's general preference group dominance, the more one supported: (1) the death penalty ( $b = .29, p < .001$ ), (2) "three-strikes" laws ( $b = .09, p < .05$ ), and (3) giving the police unrestrained power to control gangs ( $b = .60, p < .001$ ). This was also the case with regard to the composite measure of support for the criminal-justice system ( $b = .10, p < .01$ ).

In contrast, among Blacks, a general preference for group dominance was not significantly related to any of these criminal-justice measures (all  $p > .10$ ). Furthermore, with regard to three of the five specific issues, racial comparisons of the slopes analyses revealed that the relationship between group dominance and criminal-justice attitudes was significantly more positive among Whites than among Blacks. These findings were found with respect to: (1) the idea that the police do not abuse citizens ( $t = 2.26, p < .05$ ), (2) the death penalty ( $t = 3.45, p < .001$ ), and (3) giving the police unrestrained power to control gangs ( $t = 3.80, p < .001$ ). Thus, not only do the criminal-justice attitudes of Blacks and Whites differ in absolute terms, but they also appear to have different antecedents, with support for the criminal-justice system being more a matter of group dominance among Whites than among Blacks.

### Discussion

Using a variety of analyses, the present study attempted to examine the complex relationship between racial-group membership and attitudes toward the criminal-justice system. Consistent with earlier research (e.g., Decker, 1981; Webb & Marshall, 1995; Young, 1992), our findings suggest that, relative to Whites, Blacks were significantly more likely to believe that the police abuse their authority and significantly less likely to support the death penalty, even after the effects of conservatism, fear of crime, and a number of demographic variables were taken into consideration. However, going beyond the results of these earlier

studies, we also found that this net racial difference generalized to a number of other criminal-justice attitudes, including support for “three-strikes” laws, increased spending on prison construction, and giving the police unrestrained power to control gangs. Given the fact that Blacks in the United States are 89% more likely to be victims of crime than Whites (see Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000), from the perspective of a standard “crime-control” perspective, these findings are somewhat counterintuitive. Everything else being equal, one would expect that it is those who are most likely to be victimized by crime who should be most desirous of aggressive anti-crime policies (e.g., Apple & O’Brien, 1983; Seltzer & McCormick, 1987). This, of course, is not what we found. As such, both our findings and those of previous studies suggest to us the plausibility of a general group-dominance approach to criminal justice attitudes, which broadly imply that the police and other components of the criminal-justice apparatus do not merely maintain a neutral condition of law and order, but also help to preserve hierarchical relations between dominant and subordinate groups in society by subjecting members of subordinate groups to a disproportionate level of disrespect, harassment, and brutality (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; see also Chevigny, 1995).

While the notion that Blacks are less supportive of the police and the criminal justice system can no longer be seriously doubted, a group-dominance interpretation of this phenomenon nevertheless remains contentious. In particular, rather than invoking notions of group oppression or the hierarchy-enhancing role of the criminal-justice system, one might simply argue that the racial differences in support for the criminal-justice system stem from the fact that crime rates are higher among Blacks, leading to more antagonistic contacts with the police (Smith et al., 1991; Thomas & Hyman, 1977). If this alternative “criminality” interpretation is correct, then the Black-White difference in criminal-justice attitudes should decrease with increasing socio-economic success, since poor neighborhoods have a higher rate of criminal activity than

affluent neighborhoods, and Blacks are disproportionately over-represented among the poor (see Sidanius, & Pratto, 2001).

However, the data here showed a distinct tendency for support of the criminal-justice system to decrease with increasing socio-economic status among Blacks. In other words, wealthy, it is precisely among better- educated Blacks where skepticism towards toward the criminal justice system seems the strongest. Furthermore, this inverse relationship between social class and support for the criminal-justice system was significantly more extreme among Blacks than among Whites. These findings are only consistent with the “criminality” hypothesis if one assumes that criminality and subsequent police contact is greater among better-educated and economically successful Blacks than among poorly-educated and less successful Blacks, an assumption which is not supported by the extant empirical literature (e.g., Ellis & McDonald, 2001; Thompson & Norris, 1992). As such, our results are consistent with a long line of work suggesting that it is often the most well-off members of subordinate groups which show the greatest disapproval of hierarchy-enhancing social mechanisms – a pattern may which stem from the fact they are in a better position than their less-fortunate peers to compare their negative outcomes with the more positive ones received by dominants, and detect and understand the discriminatory nature of various social institutions (see Bobo et al., 1992; Cose, 1993; Hochschild, 1995; Sears & McConahay, 1973).

While these results are difficult to reconcile with the criminality hypothesis and the standard crime-control model, they are largely congruent with a generalized group dominance model of the criminal-justice system (e.g., Chevigny, 1995; Turner, Singleton & Musick, 1984; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). From this perspective, the criminal-justice system’s function is not merely to maintain a neutral condition of law and order, but also to help preserve hierarchical relations between dominant and subordinate groups in society.

Among other ways, this is accomplished by subjecting subordinates to a disproportionate degree of disrespect, harassment, imprisonment, and intimidation (see also Cole, 1999; Tonry, 1995). Given this, it seems perfectly understandable that members of subordinate groups should then express less support for the police and the criminal-justice system than dominant groups, despite their higher level of crime victimization.

In addition to deepening our understanding of how criminal-justice attitudes may justify and reinforce established systems of group hierarchy, these results also provide further evidence for the generality of “ideological asymmetry,” a pattern which has now been observed across a number of attitudinal domains, including opposition to interracial marriage, patriotism, opposition to affirmative action and intergroup affect (e.g., Fang, Sidanius & Pratto, 1998; Levin et al, 1998; Mitchell & Sidanius, 1993; Peña & Sidanius, in press; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001; Sidanius, Pratto & Rabinowitz, 1994; Sidanius et al, 2001). Thus, while it has been demonstrated that the desire for group dominance is more strongly and positively related to ingroup bias (Sidanius et al., 2001), attitudes toward interracial marriage (Fang et al., 1998), and a variety of hierarchy-enhancing ideologies (such as conservatism; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001) among dominants than among subordinates, the present study is the first to suggest that this asymmetrical relationship also extends broadly to a variety of beliefs about the police and criminal-justice system. In this vein, our results suggested that support for the police and the criminal justice system – in addition to being stronger in absolute terms among dominants – was also more strongly and positively linked with the desire for group dominance among members of these groups, net of the effects of several relevant control variables. That is, while support for the criminal-justice system would seem to be a matter of group interest among Whites, this is not the case among Blacks; for the latter, attitudes toward the police and the criminal-

justice appear to have other bases (e.g., political conservatism). Thus, taken together with these previous findings, the data presented here reinforce the notion that asymmetries in the attitudes and behaviors of dominants and subordinates might be found in about any feature or element of the social system which serves to maintain group distinctions and group inequalities (see e.g., Sidanius et al., 2001).

On the other hand, we need to caution against taking this interpretation too far. In focusing on the possible hierarchy-enhancing functions of the police and the criminal-justice system, we are not proposing that these institutions completely fail to respond to generalizable social interests; clearly such a position is untenable. Rather, we are suggesting that one of the many functions of the criminal-justice system is the preservation of a hierarchical social order in which certain groups are accorded greater power and resources than others. Thus, the multi-functionality of the criminal-justice system as a social institution is reinforced by the fact that race was not the only factor found to correlate with support for the police and the criminal-justice system. Moreover, it is evident that the overall stability of the social system also requires that subordinates have at least some stake in the overall social order (e.g., Jackman, 1994). That is, hierarchically structured social systems must strike a balance between the hierarchical interests of dominants and the interests of other major segments of society if a reasonable degree of social stability is to be maintained (see Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). Analyses which are beyond the scope of the present investigation will be needed before the “group-interested” and “public-interested” components of the attitudes examined here can be more thoroughly disentangled.

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Table 1

Support for Police and Criminal-Justice Policies As a Function of Race and Other Demographic Factors  
 (Entries are standardized regression coefficients).

Independent Variables	Support for Three-Strikes (N=984)	Support for more Money for Prisons (N=984)	Police don't Abuse citizens (N=984)	Support of Death Penalty (N=995)	Support for "Free Rein" for Police (N=286)	Generalized support for Criminal-justice system (N=1,005)
Gender (being female)	-.01	-.02	-.04	-.13**	.07	-.06*
Socio-economic status	-.01	.00	.08	-.10**	-.12*	-.00
Political Conservatism	.24**	.05	.05	.23**	.21**	.23**
Afraid to walk at night	-.04	-.00	-.00	-.01	n.a.	-.03
Fear of random violence	.17**	.04	.00	.17**	n.a.	.18**
Age	-.10**	.12**	.05	-.01	.12*	.03
Being Black	-.11**	-.14**	-.10**	-.08**	-.14*	-.14**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.09**	.04**	.02**	.11**	.07**	.10**

Note. \* p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001, two-tailed.

Table 2  
 Criminal-justice System Support Regressed on Socio-economic Status Among Whites and Blacks  
 (Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients).

Variables	Whites (b-coefficient)	Blacks (b-coefficient)	Slope Difference (t-coefficients)
Police don't abuse citizens	.10**	-.06	-2.40*
Support for death Penalty	-.19**	-.02	n.s.
Support for "three-strikes" laws	-.03	-.22*	1.65+
Support more Money for Prisons	.04	-.18*	-2.43*
Support for "free rein" for police	-.07	-.30**	n.s.
Generalized support for criminal-justice system	-.01	-.22**	-3.63**

+p< .10, \*p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p <.001, two-tailed.

Table 3

Regression of Police and Criminal-Justice Policy Attitudes on Attitudes toward Group Dominance and Political Conservatism Among Whites and Blacks (Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients).

Dependent Variables	Whites		Blacks		Slope Difference for Group Dominance (t-coefficients)
	Group Dominance	Conservatism	Group Dominance	Conservatism	
Police Don't Abuse Beliefs	.02	.08**	-.09	-.02	2.26*
Support for death penalty	.29***	.27***	-.01	.21**	3.45***
Support for "three-strikes" laws	.09*	.24***	.09	.22**	n.s.
Support for money for prisons	.02	.05	.07	.12*	n.s.
Support for "free rein" for police	.60***	.37**	.13	.11	3.80***
Generalized support of criminal-justice system	.10**	.14**	.05	.08	n.s.

Note. +\*p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p <.001, two-tailed.

Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of theories in the general group-dominance cluster include realistic group conflict theory (see Bobo, 1988; Sherif, 1966), the group-positions model (see Blumer, 1961), neoclassical hegemony models (see Gramsci, 1976; Marx & Engels, 1846/1970), the racial oppression model (see Turner, Singleton, & Musick, 1984), paternalistic-oppression models (see Jackman, 1994; see also van den Berghe, 1967), and social dominance theory (see Sidanius, 1993; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Note that there are two versions of the ideological asymmetry hypothesis, “isotropic ideological asymmetry” and “anisotropic ideological asymmetry.” Isotropic ideological asymmetry is said to exist when the correlation between any legitimizing myth and some other group-relevant variable is significant and positive among both groups, but stronger in absolute terms among dominants than among subordinates. In contrast, anisotropic asymmetry occurs when the correlation between a legitimizing ideology and some other group-relevant variable is of opposite algebraic sign across dominant and subordinate groups (see Sidanius, Levin, Federico, & Pratto, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> For a more thorough description of the variables in this omnibus interview, see Bobo, Johnson, Oliver, Sidanius, & Zubrinsky (1992). For further details concerning the Los Angeles County Social Survey 2000, contact Elizabeth Stephenson, Institute for Social Science Research, University of California, Los Angeles, 405 Hilgard Ave. Los Angeles, CA 90024-1484

<sup>4</sup> Since not all of the variables were available across all four samples, we will indicate which samples contained each measure.

<sup>5</sup> Due to space limitation, the full 16-item SDO scale was not included in any of the LACSS administrations.

<sup>6</sup> In the 2000 survey, only items (2) and (3) were asked.

<sup>7</sup> Since we will be comparing effects across groups in these analyses, unstandardized regression coefficients will be used, in order to correct for any variance differences between groups on the relevant measures (see Pedhazur, 1982, pp. 30-32, for a demonstration).

<sup>8</sup> Because of the differing number of criminal-justice scales across the four samples and the need to maintain as much statistical power as possible, this composite criminal-justice index was defined if the respondents had a few as two non-missing indices. The reliability of this composite criminal-justice index was  $a = .61$ .