



# The Influence of Essentialist Ideology on Perceptions of Incarcerated Black Men and Mental Health



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## INTRODUCTION

The US criminal legal system maintains racial disparities, and this has resulted in negative consequences for marginalized groups.

**Incarceration rates:** 1 in every 5 Black man born in 2001 is likely to be imprisoned, and People of Color are over-represented in prisons (Robey et al., 2023).

**Socioeconomic Factors:** Boys who grew up in the bottom 10% of the income distribution are 20 times more likely to be in prison (Looney & Turner, 2018).

**Mental Illness:** Incarcerated people of color are more likely to have mental illness (Primm, 2005; Proctor, et al., 2012). However, mental health treatment is lacking in prison settings, particularly with culturally appropriate treatments.

**Essentialism:** Essentialism has been shown to bias legal decision making for People of Color (Willis Esqueda, 2023). Essentialism refers to the perspective that race is a natural category, and race groups have an immutable, inner core essence (Rutherford, 2021).

The purpose of the research was to identify predictors of biases in beliefs about mental illness for incarcerated Black men.

## HYPOTHESES

**Hypothesis 1:** NEGMH, CRIMPER, and ENDURE will predict PUN.

**Hypothesis 2:** NEGMH, STIGMA, AND ENDURE will predict CRIMPER.

**Hypothesis 3:** NEGMH and STIGMA will predict ENDURE.

**Hypothesis 4:** Higher ratings on ESS and MRB will predict NEGMH beliefs.

## METHODS

**Participants.** Adult participants (N = 180, White = 91%, males = 76%) were recruited through Amazon MTurk. Participants were at least 18 years (or at least 19 years old in Nebraska and Alabama and 21 years old in Mississippi).

### Measures and Procedures

Essentialism (**ESS**) (Tawa, 2017): A belief that humans belong to race categories with a core, immutable essence.

Modern Race Bias (**MRB**) (Willis Esqueda & Zita Araujo, 2022). If I were on vacation, I would trust a white person to watch my house more than a minority person”.

Mental Health Attitudes about Prisoners.

Negative mental health (**NEGMH**): biased beliefs about prisoners’ mental health issues.

Stigma (**STIGMA**): acknowledgement that mental health can be stigmatizing.

Culpability: (Espinoza & Willis Esqueda, 2015).

Criminal personality (**CRIMPER**): attribution of a criminal personality.

Enduring negative behavioral qualities (**ENDURE**).

Punitiveness (**PUN**) (Ho, et al., 2015).



Participants completed demographics, ESS, MRB, NEGMH, and STIGMA measures and then received a bogus report detailing a burglary and prison infraction report for a Black incarcerated man. They then provided ratings for CRIMPER, ENDURE, and PUN.

## RESULTS

Cronbach’s Alphas for all measures indicated good reliability.

After examination of a correlation table for all variables, we conducted multiple regression analyses to address models. Bootstrapping with 1,000 sample was used for all analyses.

**Model 1:** NEGMH, CRIMPER, and ENDURE will predict PUN.

$R^2 = .48, F(3, 48) = 14.80, p < .001$ . NEGMH and ENDURE were not significant.

CRIMPER:  $\beta = .58, t = 4.00, p < .001, LLCI = .20, ULCI = .66$ .

**Model 2:** NEGMH, STIGMA, AND ENDURE will predict CRIMPER.

$R^2 = .49, F(3, 48) = 15.20, p < .001$ . NEGMH and STIGMA were not significant.

ENDURE:  $\beta = .54, t = 4.00, p < .001, LLCI = .24, ULCI = .80$ .

**Model 3:** NEGMH and STIGMA will predict ENDURE.

$R^2 = .43, F(2, 49) = 18.40, p < .001$ .

NEGMH:  $\beta = .26, t = 2.00, p < .056, LLCI = .02, ULCI = .26$ .

STIGMA:  $\beta = .54, t = 3.50, p < .001, LLCI = .12, ULCI = .73$ .

**Model 4:** Higher ratings on ESS and MRB will predict NEGMH beliefs.

Two linear regressions showed ESS and MRB predicted NEGMH,  $p < .001$ .

## DISCUSSION

Essentialist perspectives and race bias are predictors of negative beliefs about mental health concerns for incarcerated people and Black incarcerated men, in particular.

We found beliefs in criminal personality predicted more punitiveness with an incarcerated Black man.

We also found those who believe in enduring criminal behaviors believe the Black incarcerated man has a criminal personality.

Those who had negative beliefs about mental health also perceived Black incarcerated men to have a criminal personality as well as enduring qualities.

In addition, those hold negative mental health beliefs about prisoners and acknowledge the stigma of incarceration believed in the enduring criminal behaviors of Black incarcerated man.

Finally, negative attitudes about mental health in prison was predicted by both essentialism and modern race bias.

### Limitations

We only focused on Black incarcerated men for the findings here. However, we did include a White incarcerated man in another condition, but with no meaningful results. We also could have examined our data by US regional differences or by including other men of color. This can be a focus in future research.

### Implications

The findings here lend support for the need to advocate for policies that change ideological perspectives regarding mental health, even in carceral situations.

## REFERENCES

References are available upon request.



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