

Prisoners believe they are just as law abiding as non-prisoners

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The belief that we consider ourselves better than our peers holds true to convicted criminals as well.

Research from the University of Southampton has shown that [prisoners](#) believe themselves to have more pro-social characteristics – such as kindness, morality, self-control, and generosity – than non-prisoners.

The research also showed that prisoners did not rate themselves as more law abiding than non-prisoners, but they did rate themselves as equal.

The study, published in the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, specifically looked at the 'better than average effect' (BTAE), according to which people consistently evaluate themselves more favourably than the average peer on most trait characteristics.

Constantine Sedikides, Professor of Social and Personality Psychology and Director of the Centre for Research on Self and Identity at the University of Southampton, comments: "These findings are some of the most compelling demonstrations of self-enhancement. If the prisoners self-enhanced by considering themselves superior to fellow inmates or community members on "macho" traits, such as toughness, I would not be surprised. However, they self-enhanced on pro-social traits, on which they could demonstrably be inferior to others; that is, they were inferior on those traits to community members and were not necessarily superior to other prisoners. They ignored, to a large degree, reality.

"Virtually by definition, people who are incarcerated have shown a lack of respect for their peers and have violated a legal pact: to adhere to the laws of the community. Although non-incarcerated people do this also, it is highly likely that incarcerated people "cheat" their fellow community members more than the non-incarcerated do. To evaluate themselves more favourably than the non-incarcerated on virtually every social characteristic stretches reality to the breaking point."

During the study, 79 prisoners from a prison in south England filled out a questionnaire, which asked them to rate themselves in comparison to the average prisoner and the average member of the community on nine traits. These were: moral, kind to others, trustworthy, honesty, dependable, compassionate, generous, self-controlled, and law abiding.

Participants rated themselves as superior to the average prisoner on all traits. Surprisingly, they rated themselves superior to the average community member on all traits as well, with one exception. Prisoners considered themselves as law-abiding as the average community member.

Professor Sedikides adds: "Prisoners are strongly influenced by the self-enhancement motive (i.e., the desire to see themselves in positive light). It is because of this motive that they believe they are more law-abiding than other prisoners, and they are equally abiding as community members. Both – especially the latter – are unlikely.

"The results showcase how potent the self-enhancement motive is. It is very important for people to consider themselves good, valued, and esteemed no matter what objective circumstances might be. For anyone who doubts this, ask them if they think that their children are perfectly average."

Professor Sedikides added that the BTAE could have an impact on a

prisoner's common prediction that they are less likely to commit future crimes, when official data indicate that approximately half of them re-offend within a year of release from prison.

"Perhaps a reason for their inaccurate predictions is their overconfidence. Feeling good about themselves relative to others (prisoners or [community members](#)) may bias their judgments toward believing that they could stay out of trouble when released from prison," Professor Sedikides adds.

"Prison-based interventions, which rely on efforts to enhance thinking skills, already aim to challenge misconceptions that offenders may have about their offence and the impact their behaviour has had on society. However, prisoners also need to be encouraged to explore the reality of life after release from prison while also being offered support to overcome the individual and societal barriers that can prevent a successful reintegration into the community and the ability to desist from future crime," he adds.

More information: Behind bars but above the bar: Prisoners consider themselves more prosocial than non-prisoners:
[onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10...1111/bjso.12060/full](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/bjso.12060/full)

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