

People likely to temper criminal sentences when given information about the cost of incarceration

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When people consider sentencing an offender for a crime, they support heavier punishments when information about the cost of incarceration is

unavailable, Georgia State University researchers have found.

The research team, led by Eyal Aharoni, assistant professor of psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience, asked college students to make sentencing recommendations in simulated court cases involving a robbery or burglary, with and without explicit information about the monetary cost of [incarceration](#). Researchers found participants recommended more severe punishments when they were not informed of the annual cost of incarcerating the offender (an average of \$31,000). Collaborators include Sarah Brosnan, professor of psychology and philosophy and Heather Kleider-Offutt, associate professor of psychology.

The findings are particularly timely, Aharoni said, in the context of record levels of incarceration in the United States and an ongoing national discussion of criminal justice reform.

"If we want to improve the [criminal justice system](#)," he said, "we need to better understand the [punishment](#) attitudes of ordinary citizens because our policies should reflect society's values. Our study shows a curious bias in people's punishment attitudes. Under normal conditions, they neglect to consider the quite large [costs](#) of incarceration and punish as if the punishment is cost-free.

"But when you gently remind them that there are substantial taxpayer costs associated with that sentence—money that could otherwise be spent on other [social services](#)—people recommend smaller punishments, indicating that they do care about cost saving to some degree. So, when left to their own devices, people support punishments that are more severe than they intend, and this could help explain our mass incarceration problem today.

"Ensuring some amount of punishment was extremely important to our

participants, but when confronted with the rising price tag of those moral convictions, people are forced to think about how limited dollars are best spent, and under these conditions most of them ultimately tempered their sentencing recommendations."

"The research in this article is important for understanding processes of cognitive decision-making in the face of incomplete information, particularly the roles biases can play," said Christopher Henrich, professor and chair of the Psychology Department, "It is also very timely in its implications for criminal justice reform, highlighting the potential impact of increased transparency in criminal sentencing on how people weigh the social costs of incarceration."

The paper "Justice at any cost? The impact of cost–benefit salience on criminal punishment judgments" was published in the academic journal *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*.

More information: Eyal Aharoni et al. Justice at any cost? The impact of cost-benefit salience on criminal punishment judgments, *Behavioral Sciences & the Law* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/bsl.2388](https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.2388)

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