COVID-19 and views of imprisonment in a sample of prison tourists

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed large segments of the global population to the experience of restricted freedoms. In Canada, COVID-19-related measures led to a decrease of mobility within the country, prohibiting access to public and private spaces for prolonged periods of time. This study addresses the effects of the pandemic and related restrictions on views of imprisonment, drawing on a sample of individuals who took part in a tour of the HI Ottawa Jail Hostel (N = 102) in pre- and peri-COVID-19 contexts. The results provide some support for the hypothesis that the uncertainty and existential threat brought about by the pandemic may have contributed to more stringent support for imprisonment and increased punitiveness. However, the results are limited by the small sample size and sample composition. Future directions for research on the impact of the pandemic on public views of imprisonment are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ
La pandémie de COVID-19 a eu pour effet d’exposer une grande partie de la population mondiale à vivre avec des restrictions de libertés individuelles. Au Canada, les mesures liées à la COVID-19 ont entraîné une diminution de la mobilité à l’intérieur du pays, limitant donc...
l’accès aux espaces publics et privés durant des périodes prolongées. Cette étude porte sur les effets de la pandémie et des restrictions connexes sur les perceptions de l’emprisonnement. L’étude s’appuie sur un échantillon de personnes qui ont participé à une visite guidée du HI Ottawa Jail Hostel \((N = 102)\) dans des contextes pré-COVID-19 et durant la pandémie de COVID-19. Les résultats soutiennent, dans une certaine mesure, l’hypothèse que l’incertitude et la menace existentielle provoquées par la pandémie pourraient avoir contribué à une perspective plus sévère face à l’emprisonnement et à une punitivité accrue. Cependant, ces résultats sont limités par la petite taille et la composition de l’échantillon de l’étude. De futurs chantiers de recherche sur l’impact de la pandémie sur l’opinion publique face à l’emprisonnement sont discutés.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about numerous shifts in the realm of public health, as well as in social and political spheres globally. In response to the emergence of COVID-19 infections in late-2019 in Wuhan, China, a global pandemic was declared by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020. Days later, the Government of Canada moved to restrict access to the country by closing borders to non-citizens (Aiello, 2020). A number of measures were imposed by all levels of government that restricted mobility within the country, beginning with quarantine and isolation orders tied to suspected and confirmed COVID-19 cases, social distancing efforts, as well as removing and restricting access to public (e.g., parks) and private spaces (e.g., restaurants) (Béland, 2020; CBC News, 2020; Government of Ontario, 2020; Shah, 2020). These efforts also included “stay-at-home” orders that mandated the temporary closure of businesses and other spaces such as gyms deemed to be non-essential when cases spiked in a number of Canadian jurisdictions during multiple waves of COVID-19 (Authier, 2020).

Public discussions of these restrictions reveal feelings of having one’s individual freedom removed. These and other measures (e.g., mask-wearing) have contributed to the spread of anti-COVID-19 movements (Bogart, 2020; Rieger, 2020) and protests against restrictions, as perhaps best gleaned from the self-styled “freedom convoy” to Ottawa that began in late-January 2021 (Tasker, 2022). The pandemic also brought attention to discrimination, including systemic racism at work (Miconi et al., 2021). In Canada, compared to the rest of the population, racialized groups have been twice as likely to have perceived harassment or attacks based on race ethnicity or skin colour (21% vs. 10%), and were three times more likely to perceive an increase in the frequency of such harassment (18% vs. 6%) (Statistics Canada, 2020).

The pandemic also directed attention to those living in congregate settings, including long-term care homes for the elderly and prisons, which were considered “vectors of the coronavirus”
COVID-19 and views of imprisonment (Giroux & Ross, 2020; Pauls, 2021; Stevenson & Shingler, 2020). Throughout this period, people confined in congregate living settings have been subjected to even greater restrictions than the general population (e.g., confinement to the quarters where they sleep) (Maynard & Piché, 2020). Although news coverage discussed the prevalence of COVID-19 cases amongst imprisoned people, some reports focused on preventative measures that were in place (e.g., contact tracing, use of personal protective equipment such as masks) (CBC News, 2021). However, other reports discussed incarcerated individuals as being one of the “most forgotten and most at risk” populations during the pandemic, and of prison conditions as being “crowded and unsanitary” (Jones, 2021). Lastly, reports focused on the impossibility of following public health guidelines in a prison or carceral context (e.g., social distancing) and on the damaging effects of attempting to do so (e.g., use of solitary confinement) (Rodriguez, 2021). Despite different living conditions throughout the pandemic, some individuals living in their own dwellings have compared their pandemic experience to “living in a prison” (Deschâotelets, 2021) or being detained. The parallels have also led to reflections on pandemic-related restrictions and regular prison living conditions (Nicolas, 2020).

The combination of restrictions limiting movement and freedom, heightened awareness of uncertainty, a lack of control and a shared feeling of insecurity led to the generalized hypothesis that people writ-large were experiencing something akin to the “pains of imprisonment” (Dhami et al., 2020). Indeed, the pandemic may have created an environment in which the general population experienced living conditions reminiscent but not on the scale of imprisonment and exposure to the hardships of those living in confinement, akin to an extreme form of “prison tourism.” Yet, the impact of this collective experience on views of imprisonment remains unclear. The experience of COVID-19 restrictions on views of imprisonment moving forward is interesting, not least because many see the pandemic as an opportunity to push forward socially innovative policy reforms (Cooke et al., 2021; Sinsky & Linzer, 2020), including the depopulation of prisons (Maynard & Piché, 2020).

This study examines the effects of the pandemic and related restrictions on views of imprisonment, drawing on a sample of individuals who took part in a tour of the HI Ottawa Jail Hostel (N = 102) in pre- and peri-COVID-19 contexts. For all intents and purposes, the Ottawa Jail Hostel operates as a prison museum or penal history site (Walby & Piché, 2011). Despite widespread claims that COVID-19 restrictions were prison-like, the results provide some evidence of a more favourable view of imprisonment or a more punitive outlook in a peri-COVID-19 context where people are experiencing profound uncertainty in their lives.

PRISON TOURISM AND PUNITIVENESS

To assess the effects of the pandemic on views of imprisonment, the present study brings together sociological literatures on prison tourism and punitiveness into conversation. Prison tourism entails visiting decommissioned or operational sites of confinement for education or entertainment purposes. Literature on prison tourism sites focuses on the allure of decommissioned sites of confinement (Barton & Brown, 2015; Casella & Fennelly, 2016; Welch, 2013; Wilson, 2011). Given that these sites address suffering and atrocities, penal tourism settings can also be characterized as dark tourism sites (Hartmann, 2014; Piché & Walby, 2016; Stone, 2006). Within this body of research, studies drawing on participant observation (Naidu, 2013), semi-structured interviews (Bosangit et al., 2015) or online travel reviews (Ferguson et al., 2015) show that the desire for authentic experiences and entertainment are larger drivers for prison tourism than the pursuit of education. However, tourist views of imprisonment are little explored in penal tourism literature.
In research on the kinds of representations and attitudes reflected in operational prison tours, part of the literature highlights the pedagogical aspect of prison tours (i.e., to inform about prison conditions) (Beken, 2017). Other research suggests that what is learned in prison tours is a product of institutional framing, meaning the scope of such tours is extremely limited and even contrived (Piché & Walby, 2010). Moreover, there is a related literature on tourism and prison museums, and the meanings of curated displays. This literature suggests that while prison museums provide some opportunities for education they tend to focus more on denigrating stereotypes about criminalized acts and people (Hodgkinson & Urquhart, 2016; Wang & Luo, 2018; Wilson, 2008). There are many questions about the narrative and historical integrity of penal museum displays (Wilson, 2011).

While more research is needed in this area, the findings to date support Michelle Brown’s (2009) contention that prison tourism fosters, rather than challenges, penal spectatorship whereby participants in these encounters with penalty derive pleasure from the suffering of incarcerated others that they safely observe from a social distance (Welch, 2015). This in turn is thought to reinforce and deepen punitiveness that underpins the use of imprisonment as a response to social conflict and harm (Brown, 2009; Ferguson et al., 2015). Research across the world also shows that tours of decommissioned prisons tend to foster punitiveness by implying that penal regimes of the past were harsh without exploring continuities in penalty that persist today (Welch, 2013; Wilson, 2011; Wilson et al., 2017).

Punitiveness is a set of ideas that justify punishment and imprisonment, particularly harsher or more austere forms of these practices (Green, 2009). Punitiveness is colloquially referred to as “tough on crime” ideas and rhetoric, although punitiveness may be expressed differently depending on gender, age, political ideology, and race/ethnic group, which means the concept should be treated as multi-faceted (Brown & Socia, 2017; Carroll et al., 1987; Cochran & Chamlin, 2006; Sprott, 1999). Punitiveness may also refer to different dimensions of penalty, from policing, to sentencing, to rates and conditions of confinement (Kury et al., 2009). There is research on what variables and factors influence punitiveness in any given national or cultural context (Enns, 2014). Unnever and Cullen (2010) find that racial bias and racism are entangled with punitiveness in ways that make it difficult to measure punitiveness without also assessing racism. There is also debate about whether citizens in Canada are as punitive as those in the United States (Webster & Doob, 2015).

In a pre-COVID-19 context, beliefs about the penal system were, for the most part, understood as resulting from indirect sources of knowledge (e.g., media reports, shared community-level attitudes) (Doob & Roberts, 1984). In a peri-COVID-19 context, the collective experience of pandemic restrictions may be tantamount to an extreme form of “prison tourism,” potentially contributing to shifts in public opinions regarding the use of imprisonment within the penal system. Political psychology theories on political ideology suggest that a high level of uncertainty and existential threat can push individuals to become more conservative in their views, potentially leading to a more punitive orientation toward criminalized individuals (Jost et al., 2009, 2007). One hypothesis is thus that the COVID-19 sociopolitical context would have the effect of making individuals more punitive (e.g., increasing perceptions of the appropriateness of the use of imprisonment within the penal system).

In contrast, social psychological theories on intergroup relations and group processes suggest that, through “exposure” or “perspective taking,” the experience of the “pains of imprisonment” – however far from the harms endured by people imprisoned in carceral institutions – may lead individuals to become more sensitive to incarceration as a response to criminalized acts. Perspective-taking involves consideration of alternative viewpoints, framings, hypotheses and
COVID-19 and views of imprisonment perspectives, and is seen as a key ingredient for social functioning (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Theories of intergroup relations and stereotyping suggest that perspective-taking can foster emotional (e.g., increased empathy) and cognitive shifts (e.g., greater recognition of situational forces affecting individuals’ behaviors) leading to an increased self-target overlap, and reduced stereotyping (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). Reduced stereotyping of criminalized people is associated with decreased punitiveness (Côté-Lussier, 2016). A second hypothesis is that the experience of having freedoms curtailed during the COVID-19 pandemic would lead to increased perspective taking, making individuals less punitive (e.g., decreasing perceptions of the appropriateness of the use of imprisonment within the penal system).

CURRENT STUDY

In this paper, we test two competing hypotheses regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and related shifts in the sociopolitical context on views of imprisonment among prison tourists. To test these hypotheses, we draw on a convenience sample of individuals who engaged in prison tourism in pre- and peri-COVID-19 sociopolitical contexts. These individuals spent at least one night in a former jail, turned hostel, and participated in a tour of the decommissioned carceral site. The unique insights provided by this sample relate to their direct exposure to the penal world in a pre- and peri-COVID-19 context. This sample allows us to assess whether a peri-COVID-19 context affected how individuals, who have had their freedoms restricted, viewed imprisonment. To test the competing hypotheses, we measure views of imprisonment (i.e., perceived changes in prison conditions, perceived appropriateness of imprisonment while awaiting trial and as a sentence), and compare these views for prison tourists who completed the tour before the pandemic (i.e., pre-COVID-19) and during the pandemic (i.e., peri-COVID-19). We also assess associations between views of imprisonment and prison tourist characteristics. Contrary to the hypothesis that people who experienced COVID-19 regulations might show decreased punitiveness, we see an uptick in punitiveness among those who stayed at the jail hostel during the peri-COVID-19 period. With these findings, we contribute to literature on prison tourism (Barton & Brown, 2015; Welch, 2013; Wilson, 2011) by exploring tourist views and punitiveness in a peri-COVID-19 context.

METHODS

Tours of the HI Ottawa Jail Hostel

The HI Ottawa Jail Hostel (OJH) is a hostel in a former jail that offers tours to guests and visitors. The tours, which were led by graduate research assistants who once worked at OJH or by current hostel employees, typically took an hour to complete. The tours explore various themes including details about the construction and closure of the jail as a site of imprisonment, the architectural features and original operational functions of each section of the building, the kinds of offences that incarcerated people were accused and/or convicted of that led to them being deprived of their liberty, as well as the horrid conditions of confinement they were subjected to. Tourists are led through and told about solitary confinement, the chapel and religious teachings, the kitchen and jail food, surveillance infrastructure and practices throughout the jail, the infirmary along with the insufficient provision of health and mental health care, the goaler and matron’s quarters along with staff roles, and a typical range where they can access cells adorned in period objects. Deaths
in custody and supposed ghostly encounters are noted, as well as characteristics of death row and gallows that were used to execute prisoners convicted of capital offences prior to the 1976 abolition of the death penalty in Canada. At the conclusion of the tour in the yard where the gallows are in view and executions are further discussed, visitors learn about release and re-entry issues faced by those once held at the jail prior to its’ decommissioning in 1971.

Data collection and sample size

Online surveys were completed on personal devices and tablets available in the lobby following tours of the OJH. The first data collection period began in August 2019 and was interrupted from March 2020 to June 2020 due to the temporary closure of the hostel owing to pandemic restrictions. The second data collection period began in July 2020 and ended in January 2021 when the hostel was again closed. The site has since operated as a COVID-19 shelter for men. OJH is set to re-open in April 2023 under new ownership as a result of its recent sale by Hostelling International to Saintlo Hostels. The survey includes questions relating to motivations to stay at the hostel and complete the tour, engagement and enjoyment of the tour content, views of imprisonment, and sociodemographic measures (e.g., age, gender). Surveys were completed online using SurveyMonkey and took an average time of 8 minutes to complete. The University of Ottawa provided ethics approval. A total of 119 individuals consented to participate in the study. A total of 14% (N = 17) desisted from the study before answering the first survey item, leading to an effective sample size of 102 respondents. The survey had a completion rate of 85% (N = 87). As participants were not required to answer questions in the survey to move forward, sample sizes vary for each measure.

MEASURES

Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic

Pre-COVID-19 versus peri-COVID-19

All data collected before April 2020 were considered as being part of the pre-COVID-19 context (= 0) (N = 75) and all data collected after April 2020 were considered as being part of peri-COVID-19 (= 1) (N = 44) context.

Views of imprisonment

Perceived improvement in prison conditions

Perceived changes in prison conditions were assessed based on responses to the question “Which of the following statements best reflects your understanding of conditions in prison over the past 100 years?” Respondents could choose between the following answers: “Conditions in jails and prisons have been meaningfully improved for prisoners,” “Conditions in jails and prisons have changed, but prisoners are not better or worse off,” “Conditions in jails and prisons have meaningfully worsened for prisoners,” “There have been no meaningful changes in jail and prison
conditions,” “Don’t know” and “Refuse to answer.” A dichotomous variable was created reflecting whether respondents believed conditions had improved (= 1), as opposed to those who believed conditions had not improved or worsened (= 0). Responses of “Don’t know” or “Refuse to answer” were treated as missing.

Prison as a sentence

Respondents were asked “In what types of cases do you believe imprisonment is appropriate to use while serving a sentence?” for “non-violent crime,” “violent crime,” “corporate crime,” and “state crime” (0 = Never, 6 = Always). A mean was taken to reflect the view of imprisonment as being an appropriate sentence for criminalized acts and social harms. This measure was positively skewed.

Prison while awaiting trial

Respondents were asked “In what types of cases do you believe imprisonment is appropriate to use while awaiting trial?” for “non-violent crime,” “violent crime,” “corporate crime,” and “state crime” (0 = Never, 6 = Always). A mean was taken to reflect the view of imprisonment as being appropriate while awaiting trial. This measure was slightly negatively skewed.

Prison tourist characteristics

Age

Respondents provided their age in years.

Gender

Respondents indicated whether they identified with the male or female gender, or whether these options did not apply to their gender identification.

Racioethnic group

Respondent racioethnic group was assessed based on their response to the question “How do you describe yourself in terms of your racial or cultural group?” Response categories included: “Indigenous,” “White Canadian,” “White (Other White background),” “Arabic-Canadian,” “Arabic (other Arabic background),” “Asian-Canadian,” “Asian (other Asian background),” “Black-Canadian,” “Black (other Black background),” “Hispanic (Central or South),” “South Asian-Canadian,” “South Asian (other South Asian background),” “Other ethnic group,” or “Mixed.” A dichotomous variable was created to represent a White racioethnic identification (= 1) as opposed to a racialized identification (= 0).
Sexual orientation

Respondent sexual orientation was assessed based on their response to the question “The following question asks about sexual orientation. Do you consider yourself to be…?” Respondents could choose between the following answers: “heterosexual (sexual relations with people of the opposite sex),” “homosexual, that is lesbian or gay (sexual relations with people of your own sex),” “bisexual (sexual relations with people of both sexes),” “don’t know or refuse to answer”, and “you don’t have an option that applies to me.” A dichotomous variable was created to represent a heterosexual orientation (= 1) and a non-heterosexual orientation (= 0).

Education level

Respondent education level was assessed based on response to the question “What is the highest certificate, diploma or degree that you have completed?” Response categories included: “Less than high school diploma or its equivalent,” “High school diploma or a high school equivalency certificate,” “Trade certificate or diploma,” “College,” “CEGEP or other non–university certificate or diploma (other than trades certificates or diplomas),” “University certificate or diploma below the bachelor’s level,” “Bachelor’s degree (e.g., B.A., B.Sc., LL.B.),” “University certificate, diploma or degree above the bachelor’s level,” “Don’t know,” or “Refuse to answer.” A dichotomous variable was created to reflect bachelor’s degree or higher (= 1) and less than a bachelor’s degree (= 0). Responses of “Don’t know” or “Refuse to answer” were treated as missing.

Canadian

Respondent country of origin was assessed based on responses to the question “Where do you reside?” Response categories included: “In Ontario,” “In Canada (outside Ontario),” “United States or Mexico,” “South America,” “Europe,” “Africa,” “Asia,” and “Oceania.” A dichotomous variable was created to reflect a Canadian origin (= 1) and a non-Canadian origin (= 0).

Victim

Respondent victimization was assessed based on responses to the question “During the past 12 months, did you come into contact with the police as a victim of a crime?” Response categories were: “Yes,” “No,” “Refuse to answer,” and “Don’t know.” A dichotomous variable was created to reflect those who had been victimized (= 1) and those who had not been victimized (= 0). Responses of “Don’t know” or “Refuse to answer” were treated as missing.

Political ideology

Respondents were asked to rate their political views or affiliation on the following scale: “Extremely liberal” (= 1), “Liberal” (= 2), “Slightly liberal” (= 3), “Moderate” (= 4), “Slightly conservative” (= 5), “Conservative” (= 6), and “Extremely conservative” (= 7). Responses of “Don’t
“Know” and “Not applicable” were treated as missing. This variable was negatively skewed. A dichotomous variable was created to reflect a Liberal orientation \((= 1) (N = 50)\) and a non-Liberal orientation \((= 0) (N = 17)\).

### Analytical strategy

The first objective of the analyses is to provide a picture of survey respondents, and to compare the pre- and peri-COVID-19 samples. Preliminary analyses consist of univariate statistics for sociodemographic variables, describing and comparing the pre- and peri-COVID-19 samples. The second objective of the analyses is to investigate whether tourist sociodemographic characteristics help explain views of imprisonment. Multiple linear and binary logistic regression models are used to assess associations between sociodemographic variables and views of imprisonment. Lastly, the analyses address the main objective of testing the two competing hypotheses concerning the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on views of imprisonment. Differences in views of imprisonment between pre- and peri-COVID-19 groups are assessed using t-tests for continuous level outcomes (i.e., the perceived appropriateness of imprisonment as a sentence, and while awaiting trial) and chi-square tests for the dichotomous outcome (i.e., the perceived improvement in prison conditions).

### RESULTS

#### Sample statistics: Pre- and peri-COVID-19 samples

There were several important differences in the sample composition in pre- and peri-COVID-19 contexts. Whereas the pre-COVID-19 sample represented slightly more women than men (53% vs. 45%), the inverse is observed peri-COVID-19 (44% vs. 56%) (see Table 1). There is also an important shift in the racial-ethnic and geographic origin of individuals: pre-COVID-19 the sample was mostly White (83%) with only a minority being from a racialized group (17%), and over half resided outside of Canada (53%). In contrast, the peri-COVID-19 sample represented racialized groups to a greater degree (47%), and all individuals resided within Canada. The latter was expected given that the Canadian border was largely closed to non-residents between March 2020 and January 2021. There is also some indication that the peri-COVID-19 sample represented a more vulnerable segment of the population: they had higher victimization rates and overrepresented racialized groups.

#### Views of imprisonment and sociodemographic predictors

There was a strong statistically significant positive association between believing imprisonment was appropriate as a sentence and for those awaiting trial (Spearman’s \( r = 0.67, p \leq 0.001 \)). Perceptions of prison conditions, and of the appropriateness of imprisonment while awaiting trial and as a sentence, were not statistically significantly associated with sociodemographic variables (see Table 2). Due to the small sample size and the lack of observed associations, sociodemographic variables will not be considered in the subsequent analyses investigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on views of imprisonment.
TABLE 1 Sample statistics

|                           | Overall Mean / % (S.D.) | Pre-COVID-19 Mean / % (S.D.) | Peri-COVID-19 Mean / % (S.D.) |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| **Gender**                |                         |                              |                              |
| Woman                     | 50%                     | 53%                          | 44%                          |
| Man                       | 49%                     | 45%                          | 56%                          |
| Other                     | 1%                      | 2%                           |                              |
| **Age**                   | 91                      | 30.80 (11.07)                | 28.40 (10.19)                | 34.82 (11.47)                |
| **Race or ethnicity**     |                         |                              |                              |
| White                     | 72%                     | 83%                          | 53%                          |
| Racialized group          | 28%                     | 17%                          | 47%                          |
| **Sexual orientation**    |                         |                              |                              |
| Bisexual                  | 11%                     | 14%                          | 6%                           |
| Homosexual                | 3%                      | 3%                           | 3%                           |
| Heterosexual              | 75%                     | 72%                          | 79%                          |
| Don’t know or refuse to answer or options do not apply | 11% | 10% | 12% |
| **Education level**       |                         |                              |                              |
| Bachelor or above         | 66%                     | 65%                          | 67%                          |
| **Country/continent of residence** |         |                              |                              |
| In Ontario                | 32%                     | 19%                          | 55%                          |
| In Canada (outside Ontario)| 33%                     | 25%                          | 45%                          |
| United States or Mexico   | 3%                      | 7%                           |                              |
| Europe                    | 24%                     | 37%                          |                              |
| Asia                      | 1%                      | 2%                           |                              |
| Oceania                   | 7%                      | 10%                          |                              |
| **Victim of crime**       |                         |                              |                              |
| Yes                       | 6%                      | 4%                           | 9%                           |
| **Political ideology**    | 67                      | 2.82 (1.37)                  | 2.60 (1.28)                  | 3.21 (1.47)                  |

Views of imprisonment and the effect of the pandemic

Individuals who completed the tour in a peri-COVID-19 context were marginally statistically significantly more likely to believe that prison conditions had improved compared to those who completed the tour pre-COVID-19 (Chi-square = 3.48, df = 1, p = 0.06) (see Table 3). There was also a slight tendency for those who completed the tour peri-COVID-19 to believe that prison was more appropriate as a sentence and for those awaiting trial. However, these differences were small and not statistically significant.
TABLE 2  Multiple linear and binary logistic regression models predicting views of imprisonment

|                | Prison as sentence<sup>a</sup> | Prison while waiting<sup>a</sup> | Improved prison conditions<sup>b</sup>
|----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------
|                | N = 81                      | N = 83                      | N = 76
|                | Std. B                      | Std. B                      | OR                          |
| Age            | 0.12                        | 0.09                        | 1.08                        |
| Woman          | −0.15                       | −0.14                       | 0.69                        |
| Canadian       | 0.00                        | 0.05                        | 0.74                        |
| White          | −0.03                       | 0.04                        | 0.76                        |
| Bachelor degree or higher | −0.14 | 0.01 | 0.42 |
| Victim<sup>c</sup> | −0.11                      | −0.04                       | –                            |
| Liberal<sup>d</sup> | –                          | –                           | –                            |
| R2             | 0.06                        | 0.04                        | 0.14                        |

Abbreviation: OR, Odds ratio.
<sup>a</sup>Multiple linear regression model.
<sup>b</sup>Binary logistic regression model.
<sup>c</sup>Due to insufficient variance, victimization was excluded from the binary logistic regression model.
<sup>d</sup>A liberal political orientation was not statistically significantly associated with outcomes and was excluded from the final models because of missing data and reduced sample sizes.

TABLE 3  Pre- and peri-COVID-19 differences in views of imprisonment

|                                | N   | Pre-COVID-19 | Peri-COVID-19 | Sig.          |
|--------------------------------|-----|--------------|---------------|---------------|
| Conditions improved            | 86  | 71.15%       | 88.24%        | Chi-square = 3.48, df = 1, p = 0.06 |
| Prison awaiting trial          | 93  | 3.02         | 3.18          | t-test = −0.61, df = 91, p > 0.05 |
| Prison as sentence             | 91  | 3.84         | 3.92          | t-test = −0.29, df = 89, p > 0.05 |

DISCUSSION

In our sample of prison museum visitors, views of imprisonment amongst prison tourists pre-COVID-19 were generally favorable: just over 71% thought prison conditions had improved over time, and imprisonment was understood as being relatively appropriate while awaiting sentencing or as a sentence for a range of crimes (e.g., non-violent crime, violent crime, corporate crime). In a peri-COVID-19 context, the results provide some indication that prison tourists’ views of imprisonment became more favourable, with just over 88% thinking that prison conditions had improved over time. There was also some indication of slightly more favorable views of the use of imprisonment in the context of the penal system.

The content of the displays in the museum may have influenced the views of respondents. Notably, the tour itself focused on 19th century Ottawa and the management of the underclass of the city at that time, as well as depicted the types of people who were incarcerated and described the jail’s features (e.g., old stone walls, the size of cells). Previous research demonstrates that such tours reflect attitudes toward prison that are reductionist or stereotypical (Wilson, 2004), potentially contributing to more favourable views of imprisonment. Literature on penal and dark tourism and visitor experiences suggests people may additionally bring stereotypes to the museums or displays and imbue the representations with these meanings (Knackmuhs et al., 2020;
Existing punitive attitudes may therefore have been imbued onto the tour and its content. Whether it was the content on display, the experience of COVID-19 restrictions, or some combination thereof, respondents in a peri-COVID-19 context seemed to have developed more rather than less punitive views. It is also possible that mainstream news coverage presenting prison as a hotbed for COVID-19 drew ire toward prisoners. However, other reports on prison conditions during the pandemic and subsequent public discourse provided new insights into what life is like behind prison walls. Future research should seek to expand on how public discussions of life in prison may have shifted support for imprisonment in a peri-COVID-19 context.

The results are inconclusive given that they were either not statistically significant or only marginally statistically significant. It is possible that the sample composition pre- and peri-COVID-19 made assessing the impact of the pandemic more complex. Those in the peri-COVID-19 sample all identified as Canadian and tended to over-represent racialized groups. It is also possible that an overrepresentation of fairly liberal views provided insufficient variance in terms of views of imprisonment. Skewness in political ideology suggested that the sample overwhelmingly identified as being liberal. This could explain the weak associations between political ideology and beliefs about prison conditions and the appropriateness of prison as a response to lawbreaking. Lastly, the small sample size may have diminished the statistical power of the tests. A larger, more varied sample would provide a stronger test of the hypotheses.

Nonetheless, the results provide some preliminary support for the hypothesis that the uncertainty and existential threat brought about by the pandemic may have contributed to more favourable views of imprisonment and increased punitiveness. Indeed, pandemics tend to generate fear and anxiety, contributing to discrimination and predation on people pushed to the margins (Freckelton, 2020). The results concord in part with other findings suggesting that people in lockdown experience hopelessness to a greater degree than first-time prisoners (Dhami et al., 2020), and that the pandemic can lead to an “existential vacuum,” or the experience of a feeling of loneliness and a greater survival-orientation (Kim et al., 2021). It is possible that this feeling of “hopelessness” among citizens experiencing COVID-19 restrictions led to apathy toward prison conditions and the use of imprisonment. Though research has yet to investigate the impacts of the pandemic on apathy toward incarcerated individuals specifically, apathy towards groups that are rendered vulnerable (e.g., those living in long-term care homes) is suspected as being a potential driving factor in terms of the spread of COVID-19 (Stratton et al., 2021), while overall apathy (e.g., lack of interest in learning new things, feeling less concerned about one’s own problems) has been identified as a driver of “pandemic fatigue” (e.g., feeling mentally and physically tired, lacking energy) (Haktanir et al., 2021).

Future research investigating prison tourists’ and the public’s attitudes toward imprisonment and penal policy should assess to what degree individuals felt like the COVID-19 pandemic curtailed their own freedoms, as well as their level of uncertainty or anxiety during the pandemic. Future Canadian research may also draw on existing measures in the General Social Survey (GSS) on Victimization to assess any change in Canadians’ attitudes toward criminalized acts and state-level responses (e.g., confidence in police, confidence in courts) in pre- and peri-COVID-19 contexts. The latest GSS data were collected just before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 and the next cycle will be in 2024. These approaches and more representative data sources may allow for a clearer assessment of how COVID-19 restrictions impacted the capacity of people living in Canada to move about freely and how changes in the sociopolitical context impacted views of imprisonment.
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